

Learning Journal

Alchemy of Psychological and Spiritual Awakening

This essay will provide a summary of how this master's activated a deep desire to heal ancestral and individual trauma within me, subsequently awakening a call to change. I will begin by looking at the power of creating a learning journal and its importance in helping individuals connect with the course material. Robert Johnson observes an old Christian saying in *Inner Work* that 'one had not prayed unless one's lips had moved', meaning that something physical had to happen to create a psychological shift in awareness (1986, p. 66). My personal learning journal has been the pivotal platform to experience this shift in awareness. 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 believe that the power of writing can act as the tool to open this healing space.

This essay will go on to explore how the course awoke an intense need to heal and it will outline the steps that I took to undertake this journey. My journey begun when I read the words of Peter Kingsley's in his book *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, in which he observes that we 'all have the vast missingness deep inside us' (2017, p. 34). I feel this 'missingness' and fully believe this programme has been the gateway to creating the space needed for intense inner healing, as well as creating a deeper understanding of my own life journey.

Reflecting on these personal thoughts, I found a deep yearning to understand in depth the relationship between life, death and rebirth, as well as trying to understand my own position within this cycle. Reinforced by Rosemary Anderson's observations in *Transforming Self and Others Through Research* (2011) on intuitive enquiry. Anderson notes that 'the impulse to conduct an intuitive inquiry begins like a in the dark winter because this impulse to explore a topic claims the researcher's imagination often in an unconscious and surreptitious way' (2011, p. 15). As James Moffett observes in *Reading and Writing is Meditation*, both reading and writing have the ability to 'modify inner speech which comprises the more verbal currents of our inner stream...these have the potential to change the way we think and feel' (1983, p. 315). Moffett defines writing as 'an authentic anchoring – act of real composing putting together for oneself that modifies the stream' (1983, p. 315). It is the creating of connections that links memory, feeling and imagery, thus allowing reflection to challenge mindset and core conditions of our upbringing and belief systems.

The learning journal process has been the alchemical catalyst to my own psychological awakening. It has been an essential ingredient in actively and creatively engaging with the programme. Julia Cameron highlights the importance of writing in her twelve-step programme in *The Artist's Way* (1993). To understand the value of writing, Cameron invites you to understand the universe:

'as a vast electrical sea in which you are immersed and from which you are formed, opening to your creativity changes you from something bobbing in that sea to a more fully functioning, more conscious, more cooperative part of the ecosystem' (1993, p. 1).

Cameron notes that writing is a spiritual exercise 'to achieve alignment with the creative energy of the universe...a spiritual electricity...transcending limitations' (1993, p. 1). Cameron further explains that 'the heart of creativity is an experience of the mystical union; the heart of the mystical union is an experience of creativity' (1993, p. 1). The learning journal provided this space, creating the mystical union to challenge and engage with the course material presented.

The learning journal provides a space to critically evaluate and analyse the many epistemological positions that the course material presents throughout the programme. It is a learning space that allows a dialogue between the learner and the shifting epistemologies presented; to enable a deeper understanding with respect to one's own ontological position. These dialogues have been expressed through dreams, poems, synchronicities and other imaginative and symbolic forms. As Johnson states 'it is your work...that builds consciousness' (1986, p. 66). The insight gained is relative to the learner's own life, values and belief system, regardless of how many theories a learner connects with.

I see writing as a tool to act as a mirror to reflect thoughts, feelings and alternative perspectives. This enables a learner to access deeper intuition, which in turn unfolds an energetic release from spiritual depth. The importance of reflection enables the development of 'individuation'¹ (Dunne, 2000, p. 105). As Johnson observes 'we begin to see the difference between ideas and values that come out of own selves and the social opinions that we absorb from the world around us. We can cease to be mere appendages of a society or a clique of people' (1986, p. 12). There is an alchemical process that unfolds within this work, known as the 'opus magnum' or 'great work'.

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).

This produces change either from a physical, psychological or spiritual perspective (O'Connell & Airey, 2006, p. 146).

Mark O'Connell and Rafe Airey observe in *Signs and Symbols*, 'the goal of alchemy is the transformation of a basic substance into a higher substance' (2006, p. 146). Through my experience on the programme, I can see my own personal alchemical of awakening and this is structured metaphorically in relation to the transformation. The learning journal is the principle crucible in holding the space for the gathered raw material, the 'prime material'. The prime matter, the basic material, is divided into the four elements of water, air, earth and fire (O'Connell & Airey, 2006, p. 147). The metaphorical elements outlined below will show the changes that have taken place psychologically and spiritually.

Fire Element

From a psychological alchemical perspective, it is the understanding that the prime material is housed in the body and that the body, soul and cosmos are linked (2006, p. 147). All of us have the basics to be able to transform and to heal, connecting at a deeper level spiritually. The key element to ignite transformation is the element of fire, as it 'represents the generative force behind the transformation process (O'Connell & Airey, 2006, p. 147). In my case, the generative force came through my experiences and emotions within the learning journal group; as well as my life experiences of trauma and loss. What I believe I have stumbled on through my curiosity and the overwhelming need to psychologically heal, is the calling out of my soul. Roman D. Romanyshyn in *The Wounded Researcher*, terms this 'research with soul in mind...a process of re-turning to and re-memembering what has already made its claim upon the researcher through his or her complex relations to the topic' (2013, p. xi).

Before I came onto the programme, I felt that I was losing my ability to use my imagination and I was slowly losing myself into a spiritual vacuum. I was beginning to lose the capacity to connect with my inner self and I really did not know which direction to take. I became aware that many spiritual practices that I had turned to left me feeling shallow and lacking. I realise now that all I have ever done was 'spiritual bypass'; a term coined by John Welwood (2000, p. 11). Welwood observes in *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*, that to spiritual bypass is to 'rise above deep seated emotional and personal issues...especially tempting for people who are having difficulty navigating life's development challenges' (2000, p. 12). As Kingsley observes 'the only difference between us and the mystics is that they learn to face what we find ways of running away from' (2017, p. 34). I

believe the learning journal enabled me to turn and face my own shadow. The journaling acted as a mirror, creating a bridge between the conscious and the unconscious.

It was the learning journal group that ignited a mix of emotions and old anxieties of not being good enough, as well as questioning if I belonged on the programme. As Romanyshyn observes this is 're-search that proceeds in depth and from the depths, is about finding what has been lost, forgotten, neglected, marginalized or otherwise left behind' (2013, p. xi). I realised at this stage that I had moved into an identity crisis. Welwood describes this stage as the awakening to our 'personality strategy we adopted in childhood to survive our family circumstances becomes an obstacle to our further unfolding' (2000, p. 29). My dreams at the time despite connecting fully with the programme were highlighting deep rooted emotions; such as fear, shame and loss; aspects of my psyche that I now believe were calling out to be heard.

James Hillman observes in *Dream and the Underworld*, that dreams are places that hold 'repressed darkness...which has been and is rotting'. However, when dreams come to the surface of our awareness, they have the potential to show 'that which is not yet and is germinating' (1979, p. 61). A key question that I wrote last year was, 'How do I step into my own power, rather than reacting through my insecurities?'. One of my reflections is the awareness that I have a range of certificates and skills but ultimately, I still do not know who I am. I wrote a poem at the time of these reflections titled 'Strip it all away and I am everything'.

I am not my name, my clothes, my status, my certificates,
I am.
I am the combination of the ancestors that have stood before me,
I am.
I am the energy that has carried on,
I am.
I am the particles, the atoms, the negative and positive,
I am.
I am the darkness and the light,
I am no one, yet everyone,
I am unique, yet I am not,
I am all you can see, yet I am all that you cannot,
I am duality, I am whole,
I am the space, I am the condensed,
I am balance, I am, I am, I am.

I was aware that this programme was the key to unlocking my healing and widening my lens to view different realities, such as illustrated in the poem above. However, to enable this healing to

happen, I also needed the right tools and people around me. I felt very early on that I needed more support to remove the surrounding layers of psychological scars and environmental conditioning, in order to enable transformation to occur. The learning journal groups were tough on my spirit and confidence. I felt like Alice in Lewis Carroll's book *Alice in Wonderland* (1961) as she dropped down into the rabbit hole, confused and disorientated, finding herself mixing in with people that were speaking in riddles.

Additionally, my path became apparent through a 'visual theoria' that I created around Plato's Republic – Allegory of the cave (Addey, 2011). My reflections at the time were the following:

'Outside of the cave, I felt fear and a sense of loneliness, but looking back at the cave I knew that I did not want to go back. I knew that this step is about standing out from the crowd, you can not reach it by others or with others. There is that sense of aloneness because there must be. But the fruits of walking alone are to connect much deeper to feel the true community; one in which I belong, where we all belong if you are brave enough to step forwards. There was a sense of sadness on leaving the cave but that was because the cave was my comfort zone. The magic is outside the cave, true magic awaits, love and beauty the truths. I see the cave as my spiritual bypassing, reliving other's shadow. Until I connect beyond the images, the cave is still around me'

I had also noted the following:

'to reach out to wisdom, you need to first understand your true self from the false, otherwise how do you know that you are not tainting wisdom to your own desires, needs and insecurities'.

Interestingly, I wrote a few weeks later that:

'I was in a good place, a place of darkness, between the cave and the light – tunnel of darkness – journey – the path towards my authentic self, my soul. Dropping into the abyss to strip away the layers of perception and conditioning'.

All of this is pertinent to the wisdom card that I had picked out within the first term on the master's programme, which was 'sincerity'. I believe this card reflected everything that I have been pondering on. I felt a strong need to uncover my authenticity and not be afraid of showing who I am. I knew that my path was going to be a solitary one where I needed to reach into the depths of my psyche, but I was unaware of how to do this. I realised that I needed the help of a wise elder who had been there before. Martin Buber, a prominent twentieth century philosopher, religious thinker, political activist and educator observes that 'a soul is never sick alone, but there is always a betweenness also, between it and another existing human being' (cited in Abramovitch, 2015, p. 170). My learning journal was calling out to find alternative help so that I could call on the wisdom of my predecessors.

Air and Water Element

My wise elders came through the process of synchronicity. I truly believe that the world was feeling and listening to my anguish and that it sent a sign. As Marie Von Franz observes in *Psyche & Matter*, for many people still across the world, 'there is no such thing a meaningless accident' (1988, p. 21) . My sign came through on my second weekend at university, when my ears picked up on a chance conversation, hearing two key words, 'Sweet Tracks'. I believe that this was the element of air coming through, the element to kindle the flames and amplify the process. There was also the water element of being able to listen to one's intuition and take action (O'Connell & Airey, 2006, p. 147).

After my initial inquiry into Sweet Tracks, I learnt that it was the name for a counselling school in Glastonbury (Sweet Track Counselling Services , 2018). Within a week I had booked onto a three-day introduction to counselling, followed by a level 3 programme in Psycho-spiritual counselling, to run alongside the masters. I undertook the level 3 in the first year of the master's programme and having successfully passed, I have moved onto the level 4 to become a fully trained counsellor. My intuition knew that these two programmes needed to sit alongside each other. It has been mentally, physically and spiritually exhausting, but it was the best thing that I could have done to totally understand why I was completing this master's programme. This whole journey has been a reflective exercise to enable my soul to speak. It has been raw at times and I have had some tough mental breakdowns, but this was the start of my psychological awakening.

Earth Element

The foundation for this work was the merging of the two courses which provided stability and intellectual nourishment, as well as access to psychological and spiritual healing. Welwood observes psychological healing as a way of 'waking up to our ultimate spiritual nature'. However, to wake up, Welwood states that 'we also need to grow up – to ripen into a mature, fully developed person' (2000, p. xviii). Furthermore, Kingsley observes that to enable us to grow up 'to 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). Kingsley further notes that 'there's no going up without going down, no heaven without going through hell'. The move into this underworld is to move into the alchemy of purification, transformation and immortalizing (2017, p. 69). This is what I have experienced through this year; I essentially have felt my own death. With the four elements in place

I found myself submerging into the first stage of the alchemical process of transformation, the Nigredo stage.

Nigredo Stage

This stage of the alchemical process symbolises the early awakening of awareness. It is this stage that Kingsley (2017) refers to above, as being able to face the fear and drop into the underworld. It is within this stage that the early stages of healing take place. This was the time where I began to move into my own myth of awareness. I realised that both programmes were working alongside Welwood's three domains to allow awakening to transpire. These domains are the supra-personal dimension, interpersonal and personal (2000, p. xvii). Welwood observes that 'it is not enough to have spiritual realization. It is also essential to deconstruct the subconscious, emotional and mental patterns that are held in the body and the mind, and that prevent people from fully embodying a larger way of being in their lives' (2000, p. xviii). Regarding my own experience on both programmes, each has helped me access the individual domains to begin my own personal healing.

To access the supra-personal dimension, has been through the reflective tools that I have utilised throughout the research. Key tools that have been essential to my discoveries are meditation, reflective journaling, life timelines, dream counsels and being drawn to various authors. I noticed that my dreams had made a shift from fear and isolation to knowing that there is more than one direction to follow. My personal reflection in the learning journal in relation to a specific dream was the suggestion that:

'there is more than one direction to get to where you needed to go. You don't have to follow someone else's dream or desire. You have the ability to say 'no' and that it is alright. You don't have to go with the flow in fear that you are going to upset someone'

The personal domain has been accessed through the counselling courses, where I have looked at the theoretical elements of psychology, as well as connecting with a wise elder; a counsellor to personally look at my own neuroses. An important lesson that I have learnt from this experience is not to get conditioned in viewing western psychology as the answer. As Romanyshyn observes 'the language of psychology is the language of the rational mind making monuments out of the allusions to soul, thereby transforming them into illusions' (2013, p. 14). Romanyshyn suggests, 'a researcher is in actual service to something other than him or herself' (2013, p. 82). A concept that I fully understand since embarking on this academic and personal journey. I notice this when I write my key messages from dreams or meditations in my learning journal, as I tend to write 'you', as if

there is a second person present. There are times when I feel a drive from something much deeper, perhaps from a long-lost connection.

Lastly, the interpersonal work has been working with myths and the acknowledgment of other ideas around spirituality throughout the master's programme. I have become embodied in three universal myths that have acted as a background to awaken my own truths. As Bernardo Kastrup in *More Than Allegory* observes, 'dismissing myth is tantamount to dismissing life, for the bulk of our world is made of myths...the world consists of symbols of the nature of mind projected out and reflected on the mirror of human awareness, so to enable self-enquiry' (2016, p.118). Kastrup further suggests that, 'the essence of a myth lies in its symbolic pointing at the internal truths of cognition; truths that are inside us, not in the world out there' (2016, p.132). This was an essential turning point because prior to this I did not understand how I was supposed to connect with myths. I saw them as stories that were outside of myself. It was through the words of Kastrup that I experienced a revelation. That to heal we need to make 'the images of the myth alive through ritual...ritual of self-enquiry lovingly, that is sensitive and supportive in the process' (2016, p. 134). As Welwood states 'a complete path of inner development that addresses both our personal psychology and our deeper spiritual nature must involve all three principles – grounding, letting go, and awakening the heart' (2000, p. 19). This has been the most amazing year connecting to these principles and I have never felt more open. I have an awareness of myself and my connection to the world.

Understanding of my own mythological perspective opened through the work of Michael Kearney within *Mortally Wounded* (2007). My own mythical journey can be seen through the eyes of the wounded healer, Chiron. As Kastrup observes, 'true religious myths can thus help us live the deepest transcendent truth by reminding us of our intimate kinship with it' (2016, p.127). Kastrup refers to myths as ways to help us transcend into our lives. Kastrup implies that myth is a way of 'helping us turn our gaze inwards to realise the truth of our own nature'. Kastrup also suggests that they are there to lift 'us up to the edge of the 'hole' of cultural conditioning, from which grace can help us to take the final step to freedom' (2016, p. 130 – 131). Kingsley remarks 'to heal is to know the limits of healing and what lies beyond. Ultimately, there's no real healing without the ability to face death itself' (2017, p. 91). As Peter Levine observes in *Waking the Tiger*, 'through the utilisation of universal laws, we begin to recognise the cyclic patterns from which our reality is woven' (1997, p. 220). To fully embody our reality here on Earth and to live life with a richness and deeper meaning is the ability to be able to look death in the face with acceptance.

My ontological position is the firm belief that there is some form of existence after this embodiment here on Earth. The myth of Er confirms my responsibility to my own Soul and how I conduct myself. This myth illustrates the cosmos and the afterlife (Charalampidis, 2016). George Charalampidis translates this myth in *Plato's Republic: The Myth of Er*, as a story to educate the world on the moral and ethical issues around life and death. Charalampidis observes that the myth 'was written in order to reveal to us unknown and unexplored aspects of our souls, and to assist us in discovering and decoding the hidden truth' (2016, p. 21). This myth has fully supported my creative project in designing a psycho-spiritual self-reflection tool. A tool that asks an individual to look back through life transitions to help heal soul pain and to understand key life lessons. As Kastrup observes, it is working with the mythical voice that can provide 'explanations, predictions, past and future' which when 'properly contemplated as symbols, provide a unique window into something ineffable and otherwise impervious to self-reflection' (2016, p. 141).

In relation to the myth of Chiron, I am the soul just like Chiron who is taking the initiative to retreat, to turn back and find a cure to end my own suffering. As Chiron found out within his own search, you first need to work on yourself before you can understand and become a compassionate and experienced healer (Kearney, 2007). I believe that I am still in the process of metamorphosis, where my old awareness is dying; new insight is forming. As Welwood observes true 'spiritual practice' is about honouring the 'rich feeling-textures of personal life' to bring in the 'fresh breezes of spiritual realization' (2000, p. xi).

In summary, this essay has highlighted how my learning journal and programme experiences have been the pivotal platform to experience a shift in my own personal awareness. I can see through my enquiries and the various texts that I have connected with, that I have been moving through my own personal journey of life, death and rebirth. As Anderson observes in '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 can feel this moving target, but it is not linear it is cyclic. I am in the process of reflection in order that I can find my own truth first. Only through my own death and rebirth then can I think about helping others. Within the chaos of this era, I strongly believe that humanity is being called to heal on a collective level but for this to happen individuals must first take on the responsibility to initiate their own healing. 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).

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