

ALCHEMY AND DEPTH PSYCHOTHERAPY

TOWARD A TOTALITY OF SELF AND AN EVER EVOLVING CONSCIOUSNESS

by Katherine May

My approach as a depth psychotherapist comes through the archetype of the wounded healer and Jung who stated, “We cannot take anyone where we have not already been ourselves.” I use this as guide for my dissertation in the sharing of my personal therapeutic experience and transformation process in healing and evolving body, mind, and spirit. My personal process, along with continued study and clinical practice, forms the basis of the work I do with clients inside their own depth psychotherapy experience.

Through decades of personal therapy, analysis, and training in psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, Jungian analysis, object relations theory, bodywork, and over the past couple of years, Alchemy, I feel as if I’m finally coming full circle to the type of work I desire for myself and my work with clients. It has been a long term plan to move beyond the medical model approach to emotional and mental health issues where I was first trained as a medical surgical and then psychiatric nurse to a personal view of working with the body, mind, and spirit, of each individual being and offering a sort of homeopathic approach to healing and transforming the personality. I have always moved toward a relating to the “source” rather than a focus on fixing, problem solving, diagnosing, medicating, institutionalizing and treating these symptoms and issues. The alchemical operations provide a framework for working towards transformation at a microcosmic level of the individual personality along with evolving consciousness at the macrocosmic level of universal soul and spirit.

The therapeutic process, like the alchemical process, begins with the vessel or what psychology calls the “container” for the work. There are three vessels required in a therapeutic process in order for the psyche to work. The first involves the physical space that needs to be sealed in order to protect vulnerabilities inside a warm, loving, empathic, and caring environment much like a womb experience of the developing fetus. The other very important vessel is the therapeutic relationship itself. It must be one that allows for both container, and a “holding” environment, and also one that allows for expression of the most challenging emotions and behavior at times. The therapist’s use of self is very important here in offering what is needed to help the client feel held, heard, and understood. The unity of body and mind is the third vessel that both holds through structure, and facilitates internal and external flow through breath, circulation of fluid, feeling, and energy.

Following the attainment of the necessary vessels the therapeutic process proceeds with its **prima materia** here being Carl Jung’s concept of **Self**, beginning at a primal ouroboric state of oneness and progressing toward a totality of Self as a oneness in wholeness that advances consciousness at both the personal and universal levels of psyche. Fundamental to the work is an understanding that each person brings to the therapeutic process his or her own story and unique way of coping and surviving. Therefore, there is no set agenda, only what the Self will bring forth in the session in the way of history of life experiences, dream images, artwork, body awareness, symptoms, synchronicities, prior treatment experiences, spiritual and religious experiences, to name a few.

I will now describe a skeleton view of the alchemical operations inside my personal therapeutic process as an example of the work understanding that these are not linear, but a more spiral like process into deeper and deeper levels of experience. The first operation begins with **calcination** where my therapist and I work with ego and body defenses that, although have helped me survive, have become imprisoning and stifling to my development. The methods used include dialogue along with bodywork through the use of bioenergetics exercises, touch and holding for decreasing tense and constricted structuring or armor. The primary body and psychological defense I used to survive was a holding together to keep from falling apart with an underlying feeling of terror of being annihilated. I felt no right to exist that Alexander Lowen, the founder of bioenergetic analysis speaks so brilliantly about in his book, "Betrayal of the Body." My armor, both in psyche and body was rigid and needed someone on the outside to help me feel held together, so I could fall apart and down into the depths of my wounds and core experience.

Dissolution is the next operation that involves a regression and further letting go of defenses, dissolving and melting more into the process. I remember meeting with Alexander Lowen for a couple of sessions during this time and he later wrote a letter to me stating, "cry, cry, cry." It's exactly what I needed to do for years in and out of my therapy. I was allowed and encouraged to move in and out of the emotional pain of suppressed memories in the safe and caring environment of my therapist. Developmental needs for touch, nurturing, and holding were met for the first time within a healthy "containing" environment.

Separation ensued as the next operation where, having loosened defenses and worked through various suppressed memories and feelings, we were now able to look at discriminating between what would be supportive and facilitating to my development and what I would need to let go of. This involved personal defenses as well as certain relationships that were no longer serving me in a healthy way. During this period of time I moved my work into a private practice that allowed greater freedom, but also meant leaving a secure group practice with colleagues and risk to my financial security. My practice became a success and I was able to raise my two children as a single parent.

There was a period of time in which I experienced what I think of as a **conjunction** or the final stage of the “lesser mysteries” or “coniunctio.” I was more emotionally and mentally stable than ever, able to provide a healthy and secure environment for my children, and increased my resources that allowed me to further my training in several areas of interest towards a depth psychotherapy career and practice. I felt more and more secure, less fearful in attempting new experiences, and felt I was on a path I could continue for the rest of my life. After my children graduated high school and left home I was now on my own for the first time in my life, and although cherished the freedom and quiet, I began having more fear and difficulty coping with being alone and completely on my own. Although my prior therapist had been so helpful moving me through the first four stages of the operations, I was now feeling I needed more and began seeing her office partner, a male therapist, who I have been seeing in psychotherapy ever since.

My psychological work continued to move into a **Putrefaction and Fermentation** phase as I grieved the loss of the prior therapy and let go even more of my past and its childhood yearnings. The new therapy became more analytical and work was in the direction of staying with whatever presented itself at deeper and more unconscious levels. I was experiencing dark days and nights of the soul, spiraling down into dark spaces beyond my own personal history. My dreams were filled with more dramatic forms and images representing more archetypal dimensions that I often put into art and with the help of the therapist attempted an inner dialogue. I felt lost in the space and the death of my past as I had known it. Following this experience the therapy began progressing more towards a **distillation** that was being expressed within the therapeutic relationship and transference. I found in Jung's collected works the Psychology of the Transference and the woodcut images of the Rosarium Philosophorum. I brought in the images to my therapist and was able to show him where I was feeling in our relationship. Up to finding these images and the explanation of the experience I was feeling in unknown territory and without language to describe the experience.

As we've continued to work inside the relationship I feel more on solid ground and an experiential understanding of uniting in authentic love between myself and other in the form of **coagulation**. My work with clients evolved as I became more able to offer deeper levels of work and guide to hitherto unknown territory. Two years ago at the age of 55 I became interested in alchemy through both a synchronistic event in listening to Murray Stein's audiotapes on the subject and learning that Jung also began a serious study of alchemy at the age of 55 and participating in Jungian Seminars and attending supervision/consultation sessions with Stan Marlan. I feel both a passion and a commitment to continue my study and an applied

practice of alchemy and hopefully be able to add something to the healing and evolution of life
in both the above and below realms of existence.