

Healing From the Inside Out

by

Holly Hudley, Ph.D.

Last week on the way out of class, Roddy Young asked me, what are you going to talk to us about next week?

I said, “A plant.”

No, you are not in the wrong class; this is not a horticulture lecture. But I have a very ordinary plant who is somewhat of a miracle, that served as the inspiration for this talk.

The last two winters have been brutal to my garden. I’ve replaced about half the plants, and others were so confused by the extreme cold and last summer’s heat that they are only just starting to thrive again. We’ll see how long they last this year.

Part of my garden is a succulent bed, and they do not love extremes. They can survive dry heat, but the scalding temperatures last summer caused many to limp into the fall and winter. Then the freeze earlier this year finished off a bunch of them that were already stressed.

Except for this little guy, a Blue Myrtle Cactus.

It's a relatively innocuous plant that can look like this in bloom:

Mine has never bloomed like that, but I'm holding out hope. After the freeze of 2023, it more or less caved in on itself from the top, which turned all brown and mushy. But the lower half of the plant remained intact. I went to replace it one day last spring, but noticed a new head pushing itself out of the center of the plant. So I decided to let it be through summer, fall, and another freeze. After this year's freeze, the top got mushy again, but I noticed how much it had grown from the original crisis, if you will.

This plant has healed itself from the inside out, grown a whole new self. Or...maybe the self that was always within got revealed through the process of injury and repair. Suffering makes room for change, winter for spring, death for life. This plant is so utterly ordinary, one I largely overlooked. Now I cannot imagine replacing it because of the resilience and symbolism it holds. I'm eager to see if yet a third part of itself emerges, which would fit nicely into the three stage process I'll describe today. I am rooting for this one so hard. Aren't we all just trying to heal from the inside out? By the end of this talk, I hope you will come to realize how much we have in common with the Blue Myrtle - both in our ordinariness and in our miraculousness.

How many here have had what you might call a Mystical experience, however minor or fleeting? It might be an experience of extreme peace, a feeling of oneness with all that is. It might have been a shock to the system, even a near death experience that brought you to your knees.

I'm thinking my plant had something akin to a near death experience. Transformative moments like these are well studied phenomena, even if not fully understood. Although written about through the experiences of Theresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart, St. Francis, and others, mystical experiences weren't scientifically documented until William James delivered his lectures on "the Varieties of Religious Experience" at the University of Edinburgh in 1901-1902. Even his work is limited in scope and sticks mainly to Christian men. Since then, however, such experiences have been categorized, itemized, and sequentialized...not an actual word, but I just mean put in order.

Generally speaking, and what I'm presenting is an interfaith model -

One has an initial awakening, some kind of mystical invitation - sometimes called a spiritual emergence or emergency.

The awakening is followed by lifestyle alignment, a sort of stripping down of the ego. During this time one might experience a dark night of the senses.

Following is the development of spiritual practices that align with the initial awakening.

Finally - and not all reach this state - there is breakthrough. You see where I'm going with this... You don't get to the breakthrough until you develop {a daily spiritual practice.} You're welcome Bill.

In the Christian Tradition, this is known as the Threefold Way...written about by Saint Bonaventure in the 15th century. It's a relatively simple way to think about how inner transformation unfolds as it contains a beginning, a middle, and an end. "End" might more aptly be named continuation.

The threefold way is initiated by an invitation that may not always be pleasant.

The emergence or emergency often gets pathologized as psychosis, but must be evaluated in the context of a whole person. A spiritual emergency can be a "high" moment - one that excites, elevates, or amazes. It can also feel crazy making, like an out of body experience. It could come about as a result of tragedy or an awakening in the midst of battling addiction.

Following the initial event, which is really like a prelude to the threefold way, is a period of seeking inner and outer congruence, in other words trying to figure out what the heck

just happened. This is the beginning of the path; it is hard and challenging, a type of descent. Another word for it is “purgation” in which we begin to examine and let go of unhealthy attachments and change unhealthy behaviors. Notice the similarity to “purge” and “purgatory.” This often results in a period of dejection, depression, anxiety, or sensory overload. One might withdraw from ordinary life for a time or perpetually seek the “high.”

We can't remain in peak experiences for ever - we still need to tread on this earth, do mundane things like make sandwiches, mow the grass, and dry the dishes. In the Kingdom Within, John Sanford writes that becoming spiritually conscious is an individuation process in which we dis-identify from group consciousness. I call this process “unbelonging.” When we are awakened, incorporating the experience can arouse what he calls “divine anxiety” as we go through an initial process of differentiating from the group. We might begin to realize that we need to take personal responsibility for our life, beliefs, and behaviors. We may also feel somewhat alone.

One woman, Clare Cameron, describes her experience in the early 1900's:

“Light, light... as sudden as lightning... out of nowhere... It was all around me in great tumbling waves of joy and peace and beautiful serenity. Life stood still, crystallized. The moment was a jewel, flawless, perfect, and shining with a radiance I had

never before known. Life was calm and strong and beautiful beyond words and it was all true. I knew it was true.

“I could see it, here in the Light. I stood on a peak. I was God and about my head beat all the music of the spheres...Then Tim jumped from his chair with a thud, and there was Father bending over Mother’s worn shoe just the same, and here was I wiping dishes and hanging cups upon their hooks. The moment had passed. The Light was out. Life was thick and grey again, without color, without song, without joy, without peace. It tasted like wool; it was heavy, slow and cold. There was only the evening sunlight through the window. It was funny, that. But I would never, never forget.”

She experiences a high followed by a swift dejection. And yet the moment leaves her changed.

In the Jewish mystical tradition, there is a story about four men called “The four who entered Paradise,” and paradise is an orchard, a heavenly garden surrounded by pure marble from which water flows. The story is a clear warning that the path of awakening is a tumultuous one. It starts with: We were four who went into the Paradise. One looked and died, one looked and was smitten, one looked and cut the shoots of the tree of life, and the fourth went in in peace and came out in peace.

The four scholars - all deeply religious men - experience a spiritual awakening strolling through a heavenly garden. They

saw something like the face of God. The first guy, Ben Azzai, was overcome with shock, and he died straightaway. The second guy, Ben Zoma - a renowned scholar about whom it was said that if one dreamed of him, the dreamer would be blessed with great wisdom - saw the face of God and went insane. The third guy, Acher - also an extraordinary scholar - could not logically reconcile the encounter and he grew disillusioned. He was ultimately condemned as a heretic living outside the bounds of the Jewish faith.

The fourth guy, Rabbi Akiva, who studied the Talmud and was already on a mystical path, came into the orchard in peace and left in peace. In other words, he was the only one who could integrate the spiritual emergency without significant crisis or death. There are several lessons here.

1) if this were baseball, 1 out of 4 ain't bad. Heck, half of the Astros are hitting below .250 right now. They are also in last place - deep in the dark night of the baseball soul.

2) Integrating and healing from a significant spiritual experience is hard. Some of us get mired in the dark night, unable to claw our way out of it.

3) It could be that the 4 men represent one person, who on the fourth initiation, is finally able to integrate the experience.

4) Given that the one who represents integration is described as having a spiritual practice of study and contemplation, this must clearly be part of pulling us from the dark night of the soul.

In the New Testament, the spiritual path is referred to as the narrow way, like entering the eye of a needle. Inhabiting the kingdom within is hard work that requires patience, persistence, and practice. This is the second step of the threefold way as integration won't just happen on its own. The initial awakening may be spontaneous, sometimes emerging out of nowhere. It creates disruption and confusion in our lives because we want to believe from that moment on everything will change. Josh once told me that the first time he played golf, he got a hole in one. It has never happened again - in part because he doesn't play regularly. This first "hole in one" moment is an initiation that invites us to wake up and do the work of changing into ourselves, of healing as it were, from the inside out.

Back to the diagram: Spiritual practice is the middle of the threefold way, what we could call tending to the garden within. It is the way out of purgatory. Like my little Blue Myrtle, there is something in us that has the capacity to grow through dark winters and into new springs. To thrive in spite of the circumstances that attempt to break us down. We can find references to this process throughout the holy scriptures. I'm beginning to think that all religious avatars are further examples of how human beings come to know the true self. The holy

stories are meant to give us hope that we, too, can heal from the inside out - even in the most extraordinary circumstances. I view the sacred texts as lessons about the evolution of consciousness, and becoming more human.

As we develop spiritual practices - and they are not required to be serious! - there emerges a developing awareness that all things are in God and God is in all things. We could call this cultivating a mystical consciousness, what some traditions call the third eye. It is when our learning and knowing becomes wisdom, growing in the cosmic understanding that all things are connected.

As synchronicity would have it, I came across a most perfect Hafiz poem the other in my practice. It not only points toward the importance of our child-like knowing - our intuition - but also to that deeper sense of belonging to the universe as a whole.

A child's mere pencil sketch is every religion's best description of God.

Who then will ever take issue or argue over such a naive and innocent portrait?

Surely the intelligent, compassionate, and wise would not bother with such.

And who with a living heart would not encourage a child's art in hopes that someday,

someday a great truth and work might be gifted to our world through their soul's strength, insights, and talents and liberate and unite the spheres within a body, for inherent in true art is emancipation.

And do you have worlds within yourself? Indeed. The night sky a microcosm of you.

The oil in the lamp the sun burns come from forests you once were, from rich deposits you left.

A spiritual practice is not intended to erase painful or unexplainable events. It is intended to call attention to them in different ways, to help us integrate and grow in self-awareness. In turn, Self-awareness expands awareness of others. The Body Scan is a simple practice of noticing, of looking with the inner eye. It takes about 10-15 minutes to call attention to each part of the body, from head to toe, and observe where you feel tension or relief. It can help us to notice where we hold pain and where we experience freedom. Mindfulness is a combination of these 4 things:

the quality of our attention,

the nature of our intention,

whether we display a positive or negative attitude,

and noticing our thoughts.

In practicing something as simple as the body scan, we begin to reorient and align these 4 things. It is a simple way to cultivate the inner observer - necessary on all accounts - for our own interior growth and for any hopes we have about changing culture. We cannot change something we cannot see. The more we practice in a calm, non-triggering environment, the more aware of our bodies we become in difficult situations.

In practice, we will also encounter our self judgement and likely feel frustrated by its presence. We might judge our judgement, miring ourselves into a spiral of shame. Reverend Thandeka, who writes about racial justice and the need to address it in more spiritually oriented ways, writes that,

“Shame is the death of an unloved part of the self...an emotional display of a hidden civil war.” When we begin to tame the civil war, we re-memeber the self back to wholeness. Noticing the judgement is an opportunity....not only to bring yourself back, but also to try again with more compassion - to speak to yourself as you would a 5 year old child who makes a mistake. Really...kneel down before yourself and maybe take your face in your hands and say, “It’s okay. You’re okay. I love you.”

This is a practice that is available to us every single day, and I promise if you can cultivate unconditional positive regard

toward yourself, it will grow exponentially outward...at least until the next time your teenage son pisses you off...now its their face to take in your hands and say, "I'm sorry. You're okay. I love you." I'm so lucky...my 3 boys give me so many opportunities to practice the return to compassion.

The middle of the threefold way is illumination - a kind of springtime in which our branches broaden and death gives way to new life, vitality, and growth. Remember the plant?

Just imagine what it took for this second, inner body to push up and out from the first one. The change on the inside starts to become visible on the outside. It is not perfect - far from it. But it is no less beautiful. It is so strange how change has both and expansive and constrictive impact on us. In spiritual practice we are stripping away as we are growing up...this is the point on the path where we might experience a dark night of the soul. Old Stuff is shifting and discomfort arises. We may find ourselves in the midst a chaordic dance of something old being destroyed and something new emerging.

Sanford writes that change may feel like a "violent attack from something dark and dreadful, for when the kingdom descends upon us, the experience is often a darkening of our old state of mind so that a new consciousness may emerge."

What arises out of persisting in a spiritual practice is union - or breakthrough. This is the final stage of the threefold way. I

say final, but as I said in the beginning, it is really a continuation and a toggling back and forth between purgation, illumination, and union. Union doesn't mean you'll never mess up or never have doubts or never find yourself in another hole. It just means that you've arrived at some deeper level of knowing that there is actually oneness underpinning everything. And when you feel disoriented, you have access to zooming out and remembering the threefold way - you know that purging is facilitated by spiritual practice and that union is not just available as a possibility...it is reality. This greater sense of belonging is able to hold us in the times where we feel uncertain, small, and afraid. We are no longer disillusioned by separateness, even if we feel alone. Our behaviors and beliefs are more in alignment, and there is a trust, a deep abiding trust, that we are OK. I wonder if this is what Carl Jung meant when he said he didn't *believe* in God, but *knew* God. Paradoxically, the deeper our union, the more humble we become...the more aware we are of the ways we are psychologically and spiritually crippled, maimed, or blind. It entails surrendering to our imperfectly perfect selves.

In this stage - which may not be a permanent state of being, but it is a permanent state of *knowing* - the dividedness within and our alienation from others is drawn into a divine unity. We might come to call union a threading together of the head and the heart.

There is a shadow side to the threefold path, really to any process of spiritual awakening. One of the things that frustrates me about our culture and language filters is that we only seem to have the words to talk about healing through the lens of individual experience. Doing our individual work can feel futile in the face of enormous social and political division. or it can feel like our only choice to make. So, without having the perfect language, I want to invite us to think about how personal spiritual practice can facilitate collective action.

It is true that if enough of us do our individual work, we can start to change the world. It is also true that none of us are formed in a vacuum. We are not isolated beings and cannot stay in the closed, quiet room by ourselves. This is where intention comes in.

An intention for our personal practice can be, “How might I need to be in order for others to be free?” An inquiry like this begins to change our outward stance. It draws us toward one another with more curiosity, compassion, and openness.

Just as there are liminal spaces between the stages of the threefold way, there are liminal spaces between the self and others. A liminal space is a threshold - an in between. It is defined as the “uncertain transition between where you’ve been and where you’re going physically, emotionally, or metaphorically.” It’s where the magic happens. I read a book - god I am sounding more and more like a certain other teacher

the older I get - called *Toward Psychologies of Liberation* that emphasizes the importance of our spiritual and psychological development in community.

Mary Watkins writes: “The fabric of human life is woven with relationships. Once we thematize the importance of talking with one another, the multiplicity of ongoing and created situations in which dialogical skills can be nurtured abound. As we have seen, this requires us to slow down and turn toward each other, having a clear sense of the relationship between our current footing in dialogue with one another and the future we are trying to create. Nurturing our ability to talk with one another is essential to human liberation.” This is what it means to turn our spiritual practice outward. When we truly encounter the other as transcendent and holy, we are living out our spiritual practice. Approaching one another with the compassion cultivated in our own space, we encounter the edges where oneself ends and the other begins. The impact is twofold: we realize our assumptions about “the other” were wrong, and our shared worlds widen considerably.

Although the western church has made spirituality a largely individualistic pursuit, and psychology over-pathologizes individual behavior to explain away entire systems, none of us are separate from our cultural, social, racial, and economic worlds. Spiritual practice can actually help us attain freedom from the delusion of the separate self. As we heal from the

inside out, with a willingness to examine our biases and judgements, we also heal the world.

The Greek myth of Psyche and Aphrodite is a particularly powerful one about descension and transformation. In order to attain true love, Eros - who is neither god nor man - Psyche must undergo a set of challenges that strip away all of her personas and masks. She is symbolic of our own soul's journey. First she has a spiritual awakening. She tastes a love that is far greater than ordinary human experience and is willing to take major risks for it. Her first task is to separate various types of seeds into piles. This is similar to separating the wheat from the chaff, the life-giving from the life-draining. She has helpers here, fastidious ants. Even though she enters the phase of purgation alone, guides are available. Psyche is mute in her astonishment, her senses depleted.

The next task is to retrieve the golden fleece from fire breathing rams. This feels even more impossible. She fears death and falls into a deep despair. She is out of her mind with fear - and she has to go toward it with gentleness. Again with helpers, the wind and the reeds draw her attention to the fleece caught on nearby shrubs, and she is able to steer clear of the fires of destruction. Something like hope blooms in her, clearing a way through the underworld. The gold, of course, represents the discovery of something valuable within.

The third task is to fill a goblet of water from the river Styx that carries the dead into Hades. Again she is terrified - for she must enter the river of life and death. The goal is to relate to the vastness of life without overindulgence. Even at this threshold, she is not alone; a bird is her guide, the water a symbol of her deepening consciousness. She is starting to see herself as part of the great flow of life.

Finally, she is instructed to obtain some of Persephone's beauty ointment. Certain the goddess of the underworld will deny her this request, she almost slides back into despair. She realizes she must prepare herself - through practice and ritual - for this trip deeper into the underworld. She must resist temptations and rely upon her growing wisdom and strength. Persephone gives her a small container of her secret solution, and lo and behold, the box is empty. The ultimate discovery is that the beauty she seeks lies within. Such a realization leads her toward union. She finds herself in the dark recesses of the inner world and she can only get through it with the help of others - the ants, the wind and reeds, the bird, the creatures of Hades... our self discovery is never solo. I could not survive this journey without my own guides. (Bill)

Recall the plant here, the brownish, ordinary plant I began this lesson with. It's capacity for healing was always within. Yes it needed the elements, but this essential skill was within all along. It did not get seduced by "the underworld" where it would have remained in a partial state of existence. Like Psyche,

like this little humble plant, we humans may fight and resist and feel overcome.

Miracle of all miracles - look what popped up in the last few days: a blossom - a plant coming back to life. What the descent into the underworld teaches us is to succumb to our inner capacity for wisdom and healing and yield to the necessary teachers who never let go of the rope, who were with us all along. Herein lies the message: You are enough. You can heal from the inside out. Guides are available. As you heal yourself, you heal the world.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo, so watch your step.