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The Sacred Vessel ... a Jungian approach to bodywork

by Matthew J. van der Giessen

INTRODUCTION

Carl Jung's analytical psychology has a deep resonance with many of the formative theories of bodywork.¹ Each shares a mutual recognition of the self-organizing and self-healing process within human experience. There is a mutual understanding that healing comes not from "making change" but rather from deepening the relationship between our consciousness and the parts of our bodies and beings we feel out of touch with. Jungian psychology recognizes a language of the unconscious that comes naturally to expression in the body: the language of image. For in the end, body and psyche share the same territory. The body becomes the most concrete expression of the psyche, yet it is through the body that the psyche grounds its experience of life.

The work that follows is an exploration of the age-long relationship between the body, and the psyche it gives expression to. Understanding that relationship from a Jungian perspective gives birth to a process oriented body therapy that is not just body-centred but psyche-centred. Its focus moves away from technique and "recipe" approaches to massage and bodywork toward an interactive approach to bodywork where the practitioner "listens", watching for and facilitating each individual's natural process of unravelling.

¹ van der Giessen; Psyche and Soma, AMTA Journal, Summer 1990, pg. 73

This is a process that the body must necessarily be a part of. As Jung tells us, "...if we can reconcile ourselves with the mysterious truth that spirit is the living body seen from within, and the body the outer manifestation of the living spirit - the two being really one - then we can understand why it is that the attempt to transcend the present level of consciousness must give its due to the body."² It was that "attempt to transcend" that Jung believed was the "abiding and deepest dream of the unconscious".³ It became, for him, the great adventure and task of humanity. It was our responsibility to receive and work with its impulse, arising in symbol, as image and dreams, and experienced through the imagination of our body.

The Vessel Archetype

Jung defined a symbol that continually emerges as a central motif in our psyche as an archetype, which he describes as a kind of template, a "...preexistent form that seems to be part of the inherited structure of the psyche...", a kind of formative blueprint of life that moves upward to expression from within us in endless manifestations.⁴ The Vessel is a representation of that central motif that defines the nature of individual being. As an archetype, the Vessel resounds at every level of our being. It shows itself as the basic form of the cell and the container of family identity. It is the template of our psychological concept of self and our relationship with the world, arising in our dreams, on the walls of ancient cave dwellings, and in the sacred images of the mandala. And for the bodyworker, the Vessel archetype can form a framework for understanding our experience of identity in the body that helps guide our relationship with the client and our intention in therapy.

But as central to our sense of "self" as it may be, the manifestation of the Vessel as the womb of conscious identity is still a relatively new arrival on the stage of life - it is not so long since the "I am" that was God's sole domain took form in the primal ooze of a fledgling human consciousness.

"Natural man", said Jung, "is not a 'self' - he is the mass and a particle in the mass, collective to such a degree that he is not even sure of his own ego." It is for this reason that the transformation mysteries such as the annual rituals of the creation of the world and the emergence of world order from the overwhelming power of chaos were so important, not just to affirm the creative regeneration of nature and the cosmos, but as a human celebration of the emergence of the individual consciousness of being.⁵

²Jung; *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, pg. 220

³ Laurens Van Der Post, *Introduction to "Jung and Tarot"*

⁴*Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, C.G. Jung, pg.392-393

⁵*Psychology and Alchemy*, C.G. Jung, para 104

But there is a price to pay for the Promethean theft of self-awareness. As Jung points out, our modern lack of harmony with natural life is a direct result of the tremendous energy put into the development of intellect and individual identity. The problem arises as the conscious mind gains more autonomy, separating itself from, and then finally denigrating the world of nature, the mother-ground out of which it sprung. Without that connection we lose touch with the creative source of our being. We feel an inner sense of isolation. High in the towers of intellect, looking down upon the world, we have lost our instinctual connection with the world of nature, and the irrational forces of creativity that still seek to move us from within. ⁶

Although it may be on a somewhat shaky footing, psychic self-consciousness has become a cornerstone of human existence. Without it, we can lose our identity, our sanity, and eventually die. Many of you are aware of the now classic college studies on the affect of prolonged isolation that were done in the 50's and 60's. Confined to rooms designed for limited sensory stimulus, it was found that within a surprisingly short time, participants became disoriented and lost sense of time, place, train of thought or identity. They would often experience "blank periods", feel their bodies floating, eventually becoming quite frightened. ⁷ Without the reflecting stimulus of a physical environment, without contact with the cycles of day and night, without the reinforcement of self-identity that comes through relationship with others, we find ourselves face to face with Tiamat, the ancient snake goddess of Chaos, primitive chaotic totality that preceded the creation of the world. ⁸ Bereft of the ancient rituals that were used to carry us through such an encounter we fall into an undifferentiated chaos where identity and meaning are lost in the overpowering void.

We are not then so far from the primitive consciousness that has struggled to emerge from the primal chaos of nature. Seeing this effect amongst modern college students makes it easier to understand the devastation and death which befall those in aboriginal tribes whose punishment is "a turning of the backs" by tribe members and banishment from the embracing ritual and identity of the group.

Containment in Child Development

As contained space has been important to the development of human consciousness, it is equally important in the development of self in the child. Psychologists who study the development of relationship between our self and others point out that contained, or "held", space is essential to the development of self-identity.

Winnicott describes this relationship with contained space as beginning in the womb. Here, the child can press out against the uterine walls, a container that provides

⁶Ibid, para.174

⁷Understanding Human Behaviour, James McConnell, pg. 301

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a firm supportive environment to feel himself against. Winnicott feels this "facilitating environment" is the precondition for the safe development of what he calls the "True Self". The reflective stimulus of the womb awakens a sense of self identity that is connected to, and anchored in our awareness of our body. As Klein points out, this correlation between body awareness and self identity is actually physically mapped onto the sensory cortex of the brain, called the homunculus, "where all perceptions, all movements, all reactions are mapped." ⁹

In this mapping on the homunculus comes the formation and affirmation of what we call "body image", and a reflection through the body of our identity of self. And as we have seen, without the stimulus from a supporting environment that we can feel ourselves against we lose our sense of body, identity and self.

This need to build our sense of self by engaging with our environment continues out of the womb. A baby takes a tactile delight in the objects of its environment, including its own body. Through play, the child builds a rich inventory of experience, not just of the outer world, but of the sensory identity of self within. As it grows older, the child's emerging self-identity will continue to seek to distinguish itself from the embracing continuity of the "mother world", by pressing back against it, by raging against its confines, by saying "no".

Without the formative experience of being "held", our sense of self never fully establishes its identity; it is continuous with the world around. We have difficulty distinguishing what is "self" and what is "other". Like a cell whose membrane is weak, our identity lives in danger of flowing out into the surrounding void.

Witness this account of a mother, spending a week away from her young child. "The fourth night, the bed began to feel too big, and I kept shifting. The skin of me felt thin and taut, like a balloon about to burst. I got up in the morning and fell into work. When I couldn't work any longer I roamed aimlessly through the house, refusing to unpack. Instead of thinking I had a whole day left to myself, I was thinking by tomorrow, I'll be there. I flowed out of myself too quickly, I almost seemed to haemorrhage." ¹⁰ Her child, an essential part of her reflective environment is gone.

While distressful for a bonded mother, without a mirroring of self, a child's fledgling identity undergoes disastrous distortion.

"I felt I was reaching out and nothing was there", one client told me. "I had to hold myself in or I would fall into the void."

⁹Object Relations, Klein, pg.239

¹⁰The Mother Zone, Marni Jackson, pg. 84

Another imagines herself as a little girl, a year old, holding onto her urine until it starts to flow out of the umbilicus of her distended belly. She cannot relax. Only by holding on can she keep her insides from running out into the world.

Because we lack an embodied sense of self-identity we flow out into the identity of others. Our intuition is enhanced as we compensate for our own lack of self-identity by reading the reality of others. We may know what others are thinking, feeling, but have no sense of those values in our self.

This is but one side of the coin, the experience of "not enough". But there is another side, the equally devastating experience of "impingement", or invasiveness by the world. It is a world, as Wordsworth tells us, that is "too much with us". This is the environment that holds us too closely, or that forces experiences upon us that do not suit our needs. Rather than being met with a supportive and responsive receptivity, our formative boundaries are pushed across as another invades our fledgling space. We are not able to say "no", we are not able to say "I am". We are given no room on which to stand. Our world is owned by others.

Whether physically acted out or not, Evangeline Kane describes this invasiveness quite simply as incest, which occurs, she says, "...when individuals fail to use their imagination for their own creativity, but unwittingly project their images onto others." ¹¹ In other words, our internal world is not held within but is lived out in the lives of others.

According to Winnicott, the reaction of the infant to invasion of its space is to pull back, to cease exploring outward in the face of this invasive experience of a not-self world. But with the continuation of invasive incursions from our environment we develop further strategies of response, first by pulling in as Winnicott describes, but later as the incursions drive deeper, by collapsing our identity within the body and "blowing up the smoke-hole", leaving our home for the safety of the spirit world, and a non-body centre of identity.

Without the body as a sensory anchor, like the participants in the isolation experiments, we float.

"I was up on the mantelpiece, watching", one woman told me, describing her experience of abuse.

With another, in session, we take bodywork off the table and sit on the floor, observing the distance he needs between us so that he can stay in his body. Touch at this time is not possible. His outstretched leg will go numb if I move any closer. "Even if I am alone in the room there is only a 50-50 chance I can tell what I am feeling", he tells me.

¹¹ Recovering from Incest, Evangeline Kane, pg.1

When we have been so buffeted by the power of others, so invaded by sensory stimulus beyond our control, sensation can become unbearable. As we have learned to look on at pain we learn, too, to look on at pleasure; we are distant in relationships, out of the body when making love, we cannot stand intense conversations, or any strong feelings at all. Without the ability to feel the physical reflection of our own being we experience a gradual separation from self that is a kind of death.

"Death for an infant", says Winnicot, "...means something quite definite, namely loss of being on account of prolonged reaction to environmental impingement."¹²

Each of us will have some knowledge of these experiences. To the extent that we have experienced the invasive power of another or a lack of receptivity to our creative expression, we will know the feeling of not being met or acknowledged. And to the extent that we live without that nurturance, our inner life becomes impoverished and stunted. There is no fertile ground to feel rooted in our own being.

Jung describes this "death" of inner life in his meeting with an old medicine man, or laibon in Africa. "When I asked him about his dreams", Jung writes, "he answered with tears in his eyes, 'In the old days the laibons had dreams, and knew whether there is war or sickness or whether rain comes and where the herds should be driven.'... But since the whites were in Africa he said, no one had dreams any more. Dreams were no longer needed because now the English knew everything!"¹³ .

We are in the invasive presence of one who is more powerful than us and "knows everything"; there is no room for our own truth. We exist in another's country, and it finally exists in us.

When we live without a defined sense of our own territory we lose touch with our own story. The dreams stop. We have no container for our own life source to well up in, no bowl with which to drink from the well-spring of our own inner life. Like Jung, African writer, Laurens Van Der Post found the narcissic consciousness of the European to have a devastating effect on the ancient world view of natural Africans.

"...mere contact with twentieth-century life seemed lethal to the Bushman," he says. "He was essentially so innocent and natural a person that he had only to come near us for a sort of radioactive fall-out from our unnatural world to produce a fatal leukemia in his spirit."¹⁴

¹²Object Relations Theory, Winnicot, pg. 1

¹³Memories, Dreams and Reflections, C.G. Jung, pg.265

¹⁴The Heart of the Hunter, Laurens Van Der Post, pg.111

This erosion of the life within was linked inevitably to the Bushman's sense of story, Van Der Post tells us. "He knew intuitively that without a story one had no clan or family; without a story of one's own, no individual life; without a story of stories, no life-giving continuity with the beginning, and therefore no future. Life for him was living a story...", and in the dismissal of the sacred within by those we see more powerful than ourselves we lose our valuation of our own story, and its source in our souls. ¹⁵

This is not just a problem of individual development then, it is a problem of our culture, indeed a problem for our race. To the extent we cannot receive the individuality of another we are all damaged. As Jung points out, it would be a mistake to place the burden of our impoverished relationship with inner being wholly on the formative experiences of early life. It is against the backdrop of our development as a species that the formative drama of the individual takes place. Each story is but a thread in the fabric of the human condition.

As children, we, like the Bushman, learn to protect ourselves against the incursive forces without. We pull in, create a secret life; we escape within ourselves. We slip out the back door and into the woods, we turn a cheerful face to the threatening world so that it can never know its impact on us.

We learn, in the words of one poet, to:
"...smile, to read well,
To sparkle in conversation,
To help after dinner
To be the perfect guest
Masquerading as the host,
The host who now and then speaks
With a lump in his throat
The host who now and then walks
With a limp, or a strange pain
Around his heart, as he walks away
From the crying child in the dark room."
(From "Passing on the Seed", Chris Bullock)

But a price is paid. As we learn to vacate our bodies and perform the needs of others, or stiffen up in passive resistance against a will not our own, we lose the ability to feel out the world around us, to be sensitive to what in it suits our needs, and what is not good for us. On guard, our responses heightened by the ghosts of past experience, every stimulus becomes cause for alarm.

In each instance we learn a style of defense that leaves its legacy. When our environment doesn't hold or meet us, we learn to hold ourselves, typically creating tensions that pull in against the threatened bursting forth of our being. When our

¹⁵ibid, pg. 155-156

environment pushes in on us, we learn to brace, creating a wall of protective tension behind which we may withdraw. In the process, our body becomes segmented, disconnected and disjointed. We create frozen caricatures of the strong, responsive container we are so much in need of.

Without the warmth and responsiveness natural to our bodies, we lose a sensitive relationship with our inner world as well. To the extent that there is no one to hear our story, to receive its natural creative movement out into the world, we lose touch with our sense of inner direction, with the sense of being on a path that is so essential to the health of the human spirit. We have hidden so well from the world that we become hidden from ourselves as well.

When the growth of inner life meets up against our wounds, those places where the slings and arrows of life have left us too stiff with scar tissue or fragile to easily change, we resist, experiencing what Jung called a “cramp of consciousness”¹⁶. The mind and body cannot allow inner life to move. This is the tension that often brings us to bodywork, the stress of bracing against stimulus we are unable to integrate or change.

It is my experience that for whatever reasons a person comes to body therapy, somewhere in the depths of their being it is because they feel out of touch with themselves. The presenting symptoms may be a sports injury, chronic pain from a car accident, stress of a fast paced life, or the lack of feeling at all, but in each case there is a sense of being stuck, of being pushed in a corner. There is a loss of the ability to cope with life any more.

What draws us to body therapy in times like these is the instinctive need for touch. The magic in touch lies in its ability to connect. With touch we feel contact, and with it the experience of ourselves and another. We are flooded with a rich flow of sensory stimulus that enlivens our tissues and awakens the sleeping homunculus to a renewed experience of self. Full of the neuromuscular experience of "now" that touch brings, our bodies are encouraged to release the messages of locked defensive response, and allow ourselves to be moved in the moment. Even if what we are moved by is the pain of a wounded body or soul, there is still a reality of experience that balances the pain with a sense of being anchored in the body and connected with the earth of the self.

But within the contact of touch resides a dilemma. With touch we not only feel ourselves, we feel another, and in that contact our experience of self-identity is contaminated with the experience of the other. This contamination of self upsets the fragile integrity of our identity and creates a crisis of consciousness on the boundaries of soul. It awakens the sleeping dragons of bodily defense, and its signature manifestation, resistance.

¹⁶Jung; Alchemical Studies, para. 20

Our tensions, after all, are not there without reason. They may produce pain, restricted movement and a diminished range of feeling, but they are often all we we've got. Resistance to penetration, bracing against betrayal of supportive trust; our tensions have a history, and a memory. The touch relationship awakens body awareness. It pushes tension's fragile containers. How can we let go of that tight shoulder, that held chest? We might flow out into the outer world, or be pushed out of the body.

But touch doesn't just threaten to soften the tensions that form the container of our identity, it stirs the contents within - we feel more. Feeling more means an increase of message signals, it means the release of increased energy to transport those signals. We need to breathe more to feel more; the body awakens and becomes more energized.

This stimulation of the contents of body awareness is akin to turning up the heat under a pressure cooker. Typically, we can only sustain a certain amount of stimulus before the boundaries of our container become over-stressed, especially in areas where we have been wounded or ill-formed.

We all know the feeling. We may feel the shakiness of the weak spots in our vessel as we ask our banker for a loan, or tell our parents we are pregnant. Our brittle boundaries are not strong enough to allow us to feel too much. It is too dangerous. In being moved we feel the shaky integrity of self-control give over to the forces of chaos. This feels too much like the wounds inflicted by life and the death of identity that was their threat. We feel the threat of being engulfed by the oceans of inner life, and we pull back. Full of the resonance of past experience we will have a tendency to fall into defensive patterns too deep to control, and react in the ways of learned self protection.

Unable to listen to the body at anything more than subsistence levels, it is no wonder that we have limited use of our body's ability to "feel out" life situations or integrate anything new. New experience leaves too little room for our own identity. Unable to take in and digest new material, we can only resist it.

So, in spite of our hunger to connect, instinct protects our sense of integrity by unconsciously holding in, pushing back. It awakens the skills of survival - we hold our breath so we will not feel too much of this invasion of our space. Or we might collapse and dissociate, drifting up the smoke-hole, mistaking our disengaged muscles and collapsed body awareness for relaxation.

Often, the little we do allow in a bodywork session is enough. We feel a sense of relief when we let down even a bit. We can relax; we have been taken off task. But sometimes people will say that it felt like they had only let go of one layer of the onion, leaving the hunger for contact untouched, deep inside.

The inability to let go of the mind-set is a particular problem of parts of our persona with weak integrity. We do not know what it is to fall and be caught, to dissolve

and reintegrate again. A world with no fixed points of reference is too chaotic. We feel the stirring of a primitive fear that warns our hard won consciousness of death through dissolution of being in the primal soup we so recently emerged from. And not without reason. We do not have to look too far to see the effects of the overrunning of consciousness in the lives of the insane, or the seemingly irrational ramblings of the inner life of our own dreams.

"We must not underestimate the devastating effect of getting lost in the chaos", Jung tells us, "even if we know that it is the sine qua non [that without which there is nothing] of any regeneration of spirit and the personality."

Reclaiming the Soul Lost in Nature

Chaos is the primitive face of nature - she who is the beginning and end of all things, the Tiamat before the beginning of the world; the Indian goddess Kali, who with equanimity rises out of the river, gives birth to her children, devours them and returns to her natural element¹⁷; the ocean out of which we arise, only to return to again. Behind our rational walls we hold the moving sea. We hurry to plug the holes that leak, never acknowledging the force that surges behind, that dissolves our hard won consciousness so easily when we are shamed, belittled or betrayed.

Ancient peoples, the hunters and gatherers, knew her power. In their world we were specks in the ocean, only here for a little while, our fate after death to be reclaimed to her bosom as wandering spirits, or shades in the underworld. But with the development of pastoral societies whose survival depended on a knowledge of the cycles of planting and harvesting, came new myths that spoke of a return to the underworld for the purpose of regeneration. Just as the earth held the seed in its dark womb in preparation for the life to spring forth again, so a new imagination of the human journey arose. We too began to participate in the cycle of renewal.

"...The periodic regeneration of the cosmos constitutes the great hope of the traditional societies...", Eliade tells us. The "...`chaos', ritually actualized during the last days of the year, was signified by orgiastic excesses of the Saturnalia type, by the reversal of all social order, by the extinguishing of fires, *and by the return of the dead...*"¹⁸ (my italics)

As the role of chaos in cyclical regeneration evolved, the great religious myths of the sacrificial death of the god arose. In Egypt, Osiris is murdered and is awakened again from the underworld to bring new life to the land; ¹⁹ in Greece, Persephone is

¹⁷Hero with a Thousand Faces, Joseph Campbell, pg.115

¹⁸A History of Religious Ideas, Vol.1, Mircea Eliade pg. 98

¹⁹ibid, pg.75

abducted by Hades to the underworld, her return signifies the renewal of life in the seasons; Christ dies on the cross and is buried in a tomb, only to rise, the promise of salvation celebrated at Easter.

This then is the regeneration Jung speaks of. The ground substance of chaotic darkness becomes a place of transformative renewal, and more, it becomes a place for the transformation of consciousness. In Egypt, Eliade says, "Following Osiris' example, and with his help, the dead are able to transform themselves into "souls", that is, into perfectly integrated and hence indestructible spiritual beings. Murdered and dismembered, Osiris was `reconstituted' by Isis and reanimated by Horus. In this way he inaugurated a new mode of existence: from a powerless shade, he became a `person' who `knows', a duly initiated spiritual being."²⁰

With the ascendancy of Christianity, this view of the regenerative qualities of chaotic darkness would appear to have been lost with the myths of the ancient world. Yet, in Europe and the Middle East, a counterpoint to the domination of the light of Christ was to arise in the art of alchemy, which became a vehicle of expression for our fascination with the secret of regeneration locked in the darkness of matter.

History remembers alchemy as a fruitless search for a way to transmute base metals into gold. But, as Jung points out, stripped of its chemical naivete, the philosophy of alchemy shows a continuation of our exploration of the secret resonance between the macrocosmic world without and our personal world within that began far back in the prehistory of the world.

What distinguishes alchemical thought from the early transformation rituals, and shows its contribution to the evolving imagination of human consciousness, is that alchemists believed that their sacred work was to redeem the soul of life still trapped in nature, helping to complete the work of God's creation. In the vision of alchemy, humanity was not just a servant of the gods; the alchemist became an active partner in the act of redemption. Jung believes that it was this motive that drove the alchemists to persist at their work for well over two millennia without ever producing a hint of gold. But what they did produce was a rich and unparalleled documentation of our relationship with what they called the "massa confusa" or chaos of nature, and a detailed description of the "opus", the alchemists' ritualized process of working with the unformed unconsciousness of nature so as to release the seeds of life within. ²¹

As a study of the life-force in matter, alchemy has much to say about our relationship with the body. Because the concern of the alchemical opus is with the enlivening of the soul in matter, each step of its process provides insight into the way we

²⁰ibid, pg.100

²¹Psychology and Alchemy, C.G. Jung, pg. 306 - 308

can bring consciousness to our relationship with our bodies, and the parts of our identity that lie hidden within.

Central to the alchemical opus was the creation of the "vas" or vessel. Jung tells us that it was the alchemist's belief that "The vessel must be well sealed so that what is within may not escape."²² Without a strong vessel, forces within will not be contained, the alchemical process of transformation cannot proceed. The alchemist's vessel is an image of our body's boundary of identity. It too must have an integrity that is able to "protect what is within from the intrusion and admixture of what is without, as well as to prevent it from escaping."²³ It must hold our identity against the forces of both internal and external life.

Like the embryo of life stirring in the womb, the alchemical container holds the sanctity of life, supporting its singular process of creation. In nature, this creative holding is seen in the stolid container of the chrysalis, concealing its secret of transformation. In the imagination of inner life it is often the tomb, or the lead covered coffin of Osiris, that which carries him safely on his journey to the underworld where the sacred process of death and rebirth can be completed. This is a process the alchemists called the *circumambulatio*, described by Jung as a "concentration on the centre, the place of creative change."²⁴ When we experience this holding of space we can create a *temenos* or sacred circle, where the contents of our innermost being can come to play. We can give ourselves a quiet, intuned moment to feel the wash and flow of body experience. And as would happen if we sat quietly in the sun by a forest glade, gradually we would see more and more as the forest came to life before us. These experiences of the reality of life within are central to the development of self and to a sense of the meaning of being.

In bodywork, the creation of the therapeutic vessel begins with the physical support of our psychosomatic identity through "holding" or supporting the integrity of our boundaries. A secure vessel gives us room to breathe, a sense of relief. We can look up from our endless task of repairing the leaking dyke. This is the sense of space that has gone missing. For the moment, our fortress walls live without the threat of being breached. We can relax our guard. There is space for children's play, for the gentle courting of lovers, and for the journey into the darkness within.

The Body in Relationship

With a sense of space we can begin to explore our inner world. With a trusted guardian at the outer perimeter we can begin the journey into our inner darkness. This

²².ibid, para. 187

²³.ibid, para. 219

²⁴.ibid, para. 186

is the stage of the "nigredo" or blackening of alchemy. It is in the passage through the nigredo that we start to sort through the undifferentiated world of inner experience. Initially, the unconscious body is an undefined mass, the "massa confusa" of the alchemists. Everything touches everything else. Nothing is a thing unto itself. Emotions are undefined nebulae that we can never really identify. Inner life lacks focus. Feelings, without differentiation, threaten to well up and overwhelm us, not just as one experience among many, but with the force of the whole sea of the unconscious.

To feel the messages of the centre, to learn to hear the individual voices, we have to learn to form an allegiance to the centre. We have to build the capacity to hold, and to value our own inner life. Building an ego that is capable of meeting the chaotic life of inner experience starts with listening. The conscious mind, so used to directing and controlling life must become receptive and responsive. For how will we know if we do not ask? "What do you want?", we must ask. "What is needed here?"

For this reason I begin my sessions by asking those I work with to listen, to try and feel, to imagine what touch is needed, what route is best for the journey into the inner garden. For here we are on Psyche's turf. To hear the quiet voice of inner need we cannot "work on", "fix" or even "heal". Our very knowing drives the wounded soul before us, like a deer fleeing from rapacious hounds. Instead we must stand on the threshold, asking guidance to proceed.

Surprisingly, being touched does not mean more touch but rather the "right" touch. It is a touch that seeks out the ill-formed and vestigial boundary of the Vessel, supports and affirms its identity. It is a touch that, rather than reaching into the depths, helps hold the integrity of one's own space. Because it doesn't push over the boundary nor leave it unsupported we feel that we are not "alone, abandoned, or intruded upon in the process of experiencing profound mental states and or placing [our] trust in the therapist."²⁵ Because we don't need to concentrate so much of our attention at the periphery, we can allow ourselves to feel what Winnicott calls "in-dwelling".²⁶ Because we are held with a responsive regard, touch no longer has to be defended against but can be experienced as a reflection of one's identity back to the centre of our being. We see ourselves reflected in the mirror of the therapist's hands. We feel acknowledged. This is the touching we most deeply need. For in the end, we only feel truly touched when we finally feel in touch with ourselves.

I believe this kind of work is the most difficult for a therapist to do. It requires giving up an identification with "knowing" that is intertwined with our identity as a therapist, and with our own personal needs. To be a healer is to wield power, to be looked up to. Faced with giving that power up, we are faced with giving up our "knowing". We must confront our own inner chaos, our own fear of facing the unknown

²⁵Object Relations, the Self and the Group, Aschbach and Schermer, pg. 59

²⁶Object Relations, Klein, pg. 239

and stepping forward. Yet if we are to stay with those we work with on their inner path, we must be prepared to give up our knowing and instead facilitate the building of relationship with the unknown within. Grounded in the experience of the body, we reenact an ancient drama, perhaps best exemplified in the Medieval ritual of courtly love where "...the woman herself sets the date of the single night that is to serve as a test, and invites the man to come to her if he so pleases, on condition that he will do 'everything I should like'".²⁷ We stand at the threshold of Psyche's home ground. But we can only enter and deepen our relationship with the dark world within if we do so on her terms. Only when we learn to honour the sanctity of the body will her wisdom guide us as we enter her space.

As we learn to listen, our clients find the space to take in their experience of touch and the simple truth of their body's response. Slowly, they learn to find definition in the darkness of the world within, developing an ability to articulate their experience, to give voice to the body and its needs. They find themselves able to say, "That feels a bit too much there." Or, "Move your pressure a bit to the right." They discover the new and startling experience of stating just what they will need if they are to invite someone into their space. They learn to listen to, and value the voice of their own protective instinct, as it describes the "right touch", not too faint or too strong, but "just right" to touch them at the boundary of their being.

"I'm often stumped when asked, 'How are you in your body?'," writes Marie. "...because of abuse I've locked myself into my body and blocked myself off from the neck down. I was 'living' only in my head. My body felt so weak and powerless until it 'screamed' out in pain. It seemed my body and its feelings became my enemy, preventing me from living life, from doing things that are important to me."

Yet as distant and distrustful as we may be of the body, the slow, difficult task of turning inwards, of sorting out the threads in the Gordian knot of body feeling can only start with the body. "My head and intellect could not heal me alone," Marie continues. "I needed to deal with my emotions and body memories. I needed to stop hurting myself in the ways that I did; I needed to stop punishing myself. I had to come to a place of choosing life and living, versus destruction and death...bodywork therapy helps me to be in my body... to know that it exists and that it offers me wisdom if I listen to it and respect all of it."

To engage in this way we need to learn to be receptive. Using a form of bodywork called tracking, I help my client learn to turn an ear inwards. "Just listen", I say. "Watch my pressure as it moves down your neck. Feel yourself breathe, as you take in the experience of the touch." In this way we are encouraged to free the mind of the work of relaxing, of doing, and listen instead to the body's own story.

²⁷In Recovering from Incest, Evangeline Kane, pg.189

Janet came to see me with an injury to her back. She had overextended while learning to dive from the high diving board. But in the way that life has of welling up at times of high intensity, she was feeling other pains: anger, tears, mostly around relationships with men in her life.

As I worked, the first thing I felt was the rigidity of the rib cage. Janet noticed her breathing tight at the diaphragm level. As I got her to breathe with this, tears came. There was a release. But instead of the expected softening and flooding of energy through the body with a release of emotion, Janet went limp, dead. I asked her what she was experiencing. Eventually she told me that she could feel a membrane deadening the effect of the sensations. She could feel them but not the immediacy of them. She was splitting off. I asked her what she could imagine the membrane's function was. She told me that otherwise she would have the sensations all over; everything would be one. It was something she felt attracted to but there was some sense that this was wrong.

Because Janet was pulling in and protecting against the invasiveness of touch, I pulled my touch back outside the covers. I asked her to breathe in and feel what was there. Now that I had given her space, and a chance to explore it, she could breathe better and the membrane could come just up below the skin surface. Eventually we tried putting my hand back on the skin surface. She could feel how it felt good and yet invasive. She realized that she was willing to feel invaded for the sake of the touch. In other words, she was willing to give up the integrity of her boundaries for the sake of contact. With encouragement she could guide my pressure until it was much lighter. Now she could feel warmth move through her body, and she did not feel invaded. This experience felt important to her because she could see how she did not value her protective responses around her lower back and its connection to her sexuality. As she connected with this she felt a release through her body and energy moved into the lower back and pelvis.

In further sessions, strength started building in the back; Janet felt the need for deeper work. But at the same time she felt more able to say "no", to not rush to feel her space; she was not as ready to give herself away for the sake of contact not on her terms, and she was beginning to see where she must ask for what she needs.

This, then, is the power of touch that honours and defines the individual's boundary. As the client's sense of containment comes into focus, they can feel themselves held, they experience being reflected back upon themselves and feel the content of their being. They can begin to feel the physical reality of themselves as individuals, feeling a heightened sense of their own needs, of their own experience, separate from that of others.

Through this reflective process we learn to listen to what Russell Lockhart calls, "...that piece of still living flesh." Lockhart is referring here to a Greek story of Echo, "a rare beauty, a daughter of an immortal Nymph and a mortal father." Echo angers Pan

because she, loving her own virginity, refuses him. As Lockhart comments, "The masculine has trouble letting the virgin be."

The tale goes on to tell us that Pan "...sends a madness among the shepherds and goatherds, and they in a desperate fury, like so many dogs and wolves, tore her all to pieces and flung about them all over the earth her yet singing limbs." And so our humanity is lost in our lust to possess what we cannot find within ourselves. The completeness and beauty of life-in-itself, whether it manifests itself in our children, the virginal within each of us, or in nature, is raped, torn, and thrown about in our ravenous fury.

With no other experience to guide us around our bodies, often we will ask the therapist to participate in the continuing violation of being. "It feels like it needs a jackhammer in there. If only you could dig right in and lift it out", we will say. Feeling Pan's hunger for contact we ask for touch that is always "just a little deeper". But it is a touch that never reaches anything at all but, as one poet describes it, an "empty room, cobwebbed and comfortless...This now is yours", she says. "I seek another place." (Edna St. Vincent Millay)

We know no better. "It wasn't real until it became so intense that it was overwhelming", Andrew says. Still, pursued by such a touch, Echo will always flee just ahead of us.

But Echo never stops singing. The Nymphs collect all her parts, and bury them beneath the earth, where, it is said, if we listen, we can hear them singing still. "Psychologically", says Lockhart, "this means that any bit of our psychic earth or body earth is ensouled through Echo. It will speak back to us if we speak to it. Thus we can talk to, sing to, any bit of our earth, and any bit of our body. If we listen closely, we may hear Echo's answer." ²⁸

Echo's story demands a deeper understanding of the need for reflective touch. What is touch that honours Echo's completeness, that supports the wounded and shredded inner being? In answer, Lockhart offers us a dream. It is a simple dream, a simple message: only the words, "a dream wants a dream, a poem wants a poem." It would seem that all the life of the body wants is touch that answers back; all that is expected is that we allow ourselves to be moved by the voice of the body, and respond in kind. ²⁹

As confidence and trust in that voice are gained, a curious form of bodywork develops. Following the seemingly erratic directives of the client's need, we find that a movement evolves, perhaps first with the feet, then the neck, then the back, that follows

²⁸Words as Eggs, Russell Lockhart, pg. 159

²⁹Psyche Speaks, Russell Lockhart, pg.22

what best can be described as a process of unravelling; we learn to follow Echo's voice. Like a flower unfolding to the warmth and light of the sun, each individual's body and being participates in a natural process of opening that only occurs in a supportive and responsive environment.

Sorting Wheat and Chaff - The Feeling Function

When we bring our sense of self up to the boundary of our being, we take in the reality of the world without. We listen to our inner response to that contact. We learn to hear the inner instinctive language of the body that tells us when we are not being met. We learn to value what is comfortable rather confrontive, to heed the signs of bracing that show in shortened breath, and the tension that "puts up with", waiting for disagreeable touch to go away. We learn too, to look for the signs of the "right" touch, the touch that our breath naturally opens up to, that our muscles engage with, the touch that connects, and helps us connect with ourselves.

By learning to sort through body experience we learn to develop what Jung called the "feeling function". At its essence, the feeling function is our ability to say that we "like" or "don't like". Its correlate in the body is an immediate reaction of expansion to those things we "like", and contraction in the presence of "don't like". An important function of consciousness that Jung felt was too little developed in the Western mind, the feeling function provides a bridge between the intellectual processes of the mind and the instinctive responses of the body. The feeling function gives us a conscious relationship with the body, one that allows us to "feel out" our experiences in life. As we learn to value the somatic messages of the feeling function, we develop the ability to sort out our valuation of the world in a more differentiated way. Grounded in the experience of the body, we can apply an ethical value to life situations. We sort through the wheat and the chaff of life, guided by a sense of resonance between that which is authentic without and our growing sense of authenticity within. Body and mind, once at odds with each other, find their place in a working relationship.³⁰

When we listen to our own inner truth, we feel the sense of empowerment that comes from saying what we need, and getting it. And we feel the sense of deep satisfaction in guiding touch to the places within us that yearn for contact. As we learn the skill of tracking we find we take part in a partnership. Working with the therapist, we breathe up from the depths to meet the touch from without. We take our experience of it in, rolling its taste around in our mouth, feeling its acceptance or rejection in our very tissues, letting the refining, subtle inner voice speak its need. We are not just transmitting some passing whim of consciousness. We are listening to the authentic voice of inner knowledge, deepening a relationship between our experience of the world without and the quiet voice of our inner truth within.

This ability to say "no" or "yes" gives us the tools we need to move our boundaries out into the surrounding environment, to give ourselves that buffer of owned

³⁰Recovering from Incest, Evangeline Kane, pg. 26

space that is so essential in a relationship. We learn to listen, in our own bodies, as we send feelers out into the world around. Now, if we are in the room with more than ourselves, we have a chance to experience, not only what is happening around us, but our reactions in the ground of our bodies. We have a chance to know what we need, not giving ourselves away to the power of others, but instead letting the power of our own inner rightness guide us.

"I used to try to define ME with words and ideas I had learned from someone else," Lorea continues. "I would begin to argue (on their terms, on their premises) to somehow gain recognition, and I would lose - - and then feel like I was NOTHING. Now I find that occasionally I can feel my body and say, 'This is how I feel, this is what I want, this is what I need', and I feel like I am still there, existing and feeling that I have a right to exist as I am."

Development of the feeling function also brings the discovery of a new, important kind of distance with body experience. Out of learning to hold our own space, through listening to, responding to, taking care of, we develop an inner relationship, a sense of "self" and "other". Just as we learn to develop a sense of "safe space" in our relationship with our outer world, we can develop a sense of space in our dealings with the tumultuous world within. When we experience the upsurge of the elemental world within we feel better able to hold it, to respond without becoming overwhelmed. We know who we are in the midst of it all.

"I now know what it is like to feel grounded, to physically feel my emotions - how they sit in my body - to feel safe, to feel anything -- sadness, pain, warmth, fear, and surprisingly, joy and happiness," writes Carole. "The intensity and power of these emotions surprises me. [Yet] I can breathe in a hovering cloud of anxiety or fear that presents itself, work with it, and eventually let it go when I'm ready. Sometimes this happens consciously, sometimes not. There is no hurry - - my pace is my pace, and my answers come when I am ready for them."

Increasingly, we experience a sense of assuredness, as if by turning back upon oneself an inner sense of the "rightness" of things helps guide us. It helps ground us through the emerging storms of life. Our body becomes our home.

Healing the Imaginal Body

With touch, we not only come up against the physical structure of the body, we also touch the imaginal body. This is the experiential body we hold within us, an image of self-identity. An imaginal relationship with the body arises naturally out of the ground of our developing feeling for the body.

When we lose contact with our body, our imaginal language will trace the loss of consciousness of soul that occurs as our bodies are driven into the world of matter. Our imagination becomes distorted. We lose the humanity that enlivens the body, that

allows us to call it our own. Imaginally, we may lose parts of our bodies to the animal world. They are felt to be arms like chicken wings, or a belly like a toad's; we have no legs, but a tail like a mermaid. Others may lose even an animal sense and feel their legs to be like chalk, iron or wood. And finally we may lose imagination of the body to darkness: whole sections from crotch to knee, or below the neck filled only with a void.

The awakening of imaginal life within the body corresponds to something the alchemists called the "imaginatio". We have formed the body into a strong alchemical vessel, we have cooked and sweated over it in the nigredo, and now its essence, the soul imprisoned in nature arises. We awaken to an awareness of the imaginal body.

The awakening of imaginal awareness in the body signifies an integration of the relationship between body and mind. For some, as with Janet's membrane, the image, with its roots in chaotic sensitivity, may express the sensory experience and felt response of the boundary, creating an image of the defending membrane. For others, like Andrew, it awakened the sleeping image of a part of the self lost long ago.

In one session, as Andrew moved into his body with more feeling, a twist arose. He felt it as the expression of his demon-rage, the shadow manifestation of his denied life-force. "As a child", he told me, "I had felt like a fawn, lying vulnerable in the tall grass, protected only by staying as still as possible." He could not defend himself; he was not able to nurture the embryo of his power and strength and so it was pushed down into the shadow world of his unconscious. He needed to feel the energy of that denied part of himself, to fully feel the demon-self in its twisted expression before its face could change. By allowing his demon to meet with the reality of the world, receiving it in his body, its energy starts to change. He feels an integration of his demon's truth as his body carries him into present feelings and out of the shadows of his fantasy world. His awakening self-empowerment grounds itself in his body. "I can say `no'", he says. "I have me."

The quickening of imaginal language not only helps enliven our relationship with the body, it also helps client and practitioner guide the process of the bodywork. Imagination dictates the form touch takes. Touch becomes more responsive, more specifically appropriate to our need if we ask, "What touch is required for the legs of a little girl, or an arm that is tired from holding a shield?" The practitioner learns to develop an imaginably guided touch, responsive to the needs of the client's imaginal being. "That touch is too soft", said one woman. She imagines it to be the seductive touch of her childhood abuser. The image allows her to make sense of her body response; it will also guide her in imagining a touch more appropriate to her need.

As we awaken to an imaginal awareness of our bodies, we learn to work with our dreams through the body. In ancient Greece, this process was at the core of the cult of Aesklepius, the origins of our Western culture of healing. In those times, when all physical forms of healing had failed, the afflicted would go to a shrine of Aesklepius,

there to be prepared by the priests to enter a chamber, or abaton, to await a healing dream or vision from the god.

When the successful supplicant arose, the priests would hear the dream and interpret it, not, Sanford tells us, to translate its meaning, but rather only to ascertain if it was indeed a numinous or powerful dream, one sent directly from the god. It was the dream itself that by its action healed. ³¹

The idea of experiencing the healing dream has mostly been lost to this intellectual time of ours. Yet Jung, who spent his life working with dreams says repeatedly that first and foremost we must experience the dream. We must allow it to impact on our whole being, not just hold it at arms' length to be dissected with our minds.

In bodywork, deepening means we breathe with the image, feeling its moods and tensions, allowing ourselves to be pulled into it, to engage with its figures within our bodies, and to take its meaning physically into our lives. We learn the wisdom of the healing dreams of Aesklepius as we take dream images in at a body level, receiving and holding them within our Vessel. We allow them to work on us, carrying their feeling within us. Contained, they become an incubus of inner life that nurtures us, countering the outer pull of the world as we move through our day.

Deborah felt her life was falling apart. Her marriage had collapsed, her husband was suing her for divorce; she had no money, no lawyer, no sense of support or place of refuge in her world. She was terrified; she felt she couldn't move forward. She felt stuck.

In a bodywork session she remembered a forgotten dream. A dog she called the "black bitch" was showing her a pit of nuclear waste. The dream underlined all her fears of the invisible dangers she could not protect herself against. It placed her exactly where she was. She got the reality of it in her body.

The next day she dreamt again, a dream that named itself, "The Guarding of the Shaman." In the dream, she looks down on a funeral carriage. There is a woman lying beside a supposedly "dead" man. She pulls aside the covers to reveal his legs in casts. His name is Russell or Jock.

As she lay on the bodywork table, she breathed into the dream image. She took the dream into her body, and the dream image began to move. Now she was in the body of the shaman. She can hear the woman ministering and chanting as the carriage was pulled along. She feels the weight of the casts on her legs as I put a pillow over them. She is wholly there; she feels a strong need to give herself over to the process. "I felt wholly committed to allowing the journey to proceed," she says.

³¹Healing and Wholeness, John Sanford, pg.47

Then the carriage started to move into a tunnel "so dark it's bright". Somewhere at the end of the tunnel there might be a bright, sunlit field of daisies. But that does not matter now; she has given herself to the journey into the darkness.

The scene changes. She is standing, looking out over the sea, with the wind in her hair. She feels as if she is pregnant with the earth in her belly, the earth under her feet. She feels a bitter sweetness of love as she regards the woman of the carriage.

That morning, before her appointment, the dream had already started to move into her body. She wrote,

"As I woke up I felt like I was in a little cocoon of blankets. I noticed that I felt different and I tried to name the feeling. I felt secure. After all of those times of feeling floaty, lost, ungrounded, I finally felt secure. Even as I am writing now, I still feel secure, not in control but secure. I feel in my belly and in the soles of my feet. Secure. I like that. I hope it lasts. Isn't it interesting that the bottom of the feet are called soles, the place where our bodies come in contact with the earth!? I like this feeling. I deserve this feeling. Just at the moment I feel absolute joy."

This was the beginning of change in Deborah's life. Gradually she felt able to move forward, to let her life move. She could give herself over with her whole being, and let herself be carried through the dark passage, through the process of regenerative change.

"First I changed, then the world started moving again", she said. "The notion of surrender is so important." No longer frozen, she could pick up the threads of her story again. There was a resonance between life, within and without. She found herself singing a song of praise as she walked along. It was Easter.

This alchemical task, the redemption of soul from the undifferentiated chaos of our own beings takes on the form of a sacred task. I do not mean to romanticize here, but only to speak for the experience of those who have chosen to work with me. By sitting, like the alchemists of old, over the formation of our sacred Vessel, tending its creation as a container for the essence of our being, we begin to feel the scattered energies of our inner life take form, to organize around a centre that alchemists called the lapis, and that Jung called the Self.

As we learn to own and relate to the instinctual life force within, we begin to hear what many I work with refer to as their own story emerging. Our imagination and sensory life bring us information from the microcosm within and the great world beyond. Our feeling function guides each foot step when we move forward, leads us through each quiet moment of introspection. We start to move less as a marionette, pulled by the strings of old stories and expectations, but instead respond to a feel of rightness that resonates from within our own being.

Through healing our ego's ability to contain the world within, a shifting of power comes to realization. The process we started with the first "listening" to body experience matures with the realization that the true source of knowledge and direction is no longer the world of the intellectual mind, but has moved inward. Taking on the full realization of that truth often feels like a crucifixion for ego consciousness. Giving over at any time before would have felt too much like the memory of giving way before the penetration of our being by the invasive forces of our formative wounds. Now we learn to tell the difference between letting go of intellectual control and giving up our Self. We surrender, not to the outer world, but to the centre, knowing we have the strength and resiliency to respond.

As Marie Louise Von Franz describes it, "The experience of the Self brings a feeling of standing on solid ground inside oneself, on a patch of inner eternity which even physical death cannot touch."³² It is the image of wholeness within ourselves, the template that guides us, the archetype of innermost being.

Consciousness, while no longer in the centre as the guide in life, takes up a valued position as the protector, the container of the forces of life. It is the keeper of the gate, the circumference that contains the centre, it is the guardian of the soul within.

When we learn to listen to that inner voice, then we, like the original peoples of the earth can begin to hear once again, "the dream that dreams us", and to feel our feet, step by step, on the firmity of our own path. We are just ourselves, adding our voice to the unfolding story of humanity.

³²in Jung and Tarot, Sallie Nichols, pg. 352