



Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy (Reality of the Psyche)

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"Edinger has greatly enriched my understanding of psychology through the avenue of alchemy. No other contribution has been as helpful as this for revealing, in a word, the anatomy of the psyche and how it applies to where one is in his or her process. This is a significant amplification and extension of Jung's work. Two hundred years from now, it will still be a useful handbook and an inspiring aid to those who care about individuation." -- Psychological Perspectives

Anatomy of the Psyche: Alchemical Symbolism in Psychotherapy (Reality of the Psyche) Details

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loudermilk says

a dream can only swim in sleep, so here is the latest gasping mermaid. (my niece called me the best man ever, when I ball her up in my arms her little body sings to me and I press her tightly to my ear.) that wasn't the dream. I killed ogres in another girl's dream last night, she had to tell me because dreams are a shameless kind of truth, or even an update. the world that my niece lives in. in my dream I'm solid, unfound, running out of fuel, feeling dark, numb to dread.

(the old problem of miniature deaths is bugging me out right now. like, live in front of me quickly and show me your next little death then we'll carry on in another corner with someone else. swan lake every night.)

A fingertip so close to my eyes I can see the glittering pink details between the whorls and arches. I must have put my face that close, I'm an idiot, or a swoony baboon. (this is as close as I comfortably get, dreaming on table tops).

It doesn't know I'm there and it kills an ant on the table-top, rolls it out in a disastrous gymnastic. (if it saw I was there it wouldn't have killed, I don't think. It would have said to me "you ARE a strange boy" like a lioness is too tired to look at her nipping cubs.)

there must be fingertips detonating thoughtlessly on lots of secret hands

I want to test that I'm really dead so I take off my clothes and stand in an underpass at night telling anyone who passes that I am here for them. no one notices.

I start to laugh half way through my prayers. send flowers to my mother.

Wctiii says

Cracks away at alchemy from a Jungian perspective in a well organized way, not skipping over the basics and not quite dumming it down either.

Abner Rosenweig says

Edinger is a titan in depth psychology. Consequently I had great expectations for this book and was a bit disappointed. The research and scholarship are first rate, and the illustrations from classic alchemical texts are fantastic. However, even though Edinger expresses up front that alchemical processes in psychology have no single linear progression and must be addressed through an examination of its various operations, the book places too much emphasis on the parts rather than the whole and, I feel, loses the forest in the trees. I would have appreciated a more holistic approach that emphasized how the processes work in concert to achieve transformation. Also, while Edinger provides a good outline of what each alchemical operation is, he doesn't focus enough on how the processes operate in individual psychic transformation. A case study

illustrating the operations in practice would have been useful. So, the book is a good resource, but to get a clearer sense of how alchemy operates in the psyche, I'll have to look elsewhere.

Rikki says

This book is wonderful. Stages of alchemy as they relate to jungian psychology. Lots of dream images as examples- very cool insights. ah-huh.

Stephanie says

My therapist, a Jungian analyst, recommended this book to me when I started referring to alchemical concepts in the therapy room. I told her that my dreams, and other upwellings from my unconscious, reminded me of the alchemical concepts of "higredo" and "albedo," even though I hadn't studied or read about these concepts, or alchemy in general, for years. This triggered a renewed interest in the subject, and my cursory review of material about alchemy on the Internet gave me some basic ideas to work with, but I yearned for a clearer map of the mysterious process of transformation that seemed to be unfolding within me.

My therapist's recommendation was spot-on, as this book provided a more perfect map than I ever anticipated finding. To be clear, as academic as this book is in its style and substance, it is also very intuitive and mystical, and the map it provides is not linear. It does not describe a series of steps or stages, but rather different dynamics that can occur at any time and in any order. Edinger makes clear that each process tends to lead to another, and the way the spiral of transformation unfolds depends on the unique elements that make up an individual life. Thus while *Anatomy of the Psyche* did not give me a fixed, universal standard to measure myself against, it did indeed deepen my understanding of my dreams and my psyche, showing me how to tune in to the elemental quality of what I am experiencing to understand what most needs my attention.

Edinger proceeds from Jung's conclusion that the alchemists projected their inner states onto their observations in the lab, and for this reason alchemical imagery is highly relevant to inner work, especially that inner work which uses dreams as a gateway to the unconscious. In the examples Edinger uses, he also shows how these symbols and the dynamics to which they refer far predate the alchemical era, showing up in Greek myths and the Bible, among other places.

Edinger's approach is to begin each chapter with a description of the physical process as the alchemists observed it, citing alchemical works and including images from those works. He then proceeds to its appearance in literature and religious myth, quoting poems and showing images from related illustrations and art. He then explores how these dynamics apply to Jungian therapy, sharing examples of alchemical imagery from his patients' dreams and from their stories of personal growth and change.

What is most profound about this book is how basic and universal these dynamics reveal themselves to be; it's as if, as a reader, you're being given a key to the secrets of the living world. It's easy in our day and age to see our periodic table of the elements and practical application of chemistry as superior in every way to the alchemists' concepts of the four elements and the transmutation of matter. However, modern chemistry is so specific that its knowledge often is only useful in a limited, applied arena; it is harder to take away general principles from it. What the alchemists recorded was part of their attempt to uncover a universal process, and

as such, points to dynamics of change that can be everywhere observed in nature, as well as in ourselves.

CALCINATIO. Application of intense heat quickly removes impurities, but can destroy all but the most resilient objects. In *Game of Thrones*, Daenerys's emergence from the flames is such a powerful image because it is so timeless, a reflection of a process anyone understands who has been through intense suffering or trauma. We rarely choose calcination consciously as a path, but knowing how it can forge us can give us hope when we find ourselves raked over the coals.

SOLUTIO. When one material is made liquid and dissolved into another, whichever liquid is of greater volume takes precedence in the resulting mix. Edinger likens this to how we lose ourselves in identification with a person or group that has a more comprehensive perspective or complex mode of being than ourselves. While this often produces feelings of euphoria, an erotic merging that is the subject of so many songs and poems, it is also threatening to a small and brittle ego, and this fear of engulfment is often the source of great strife and conflict. People become frightened and aggressive when confronted with a viewpoint that could swallow their own.

SUBLIMATIO. Just as the process of solutio goes far in explaining many political and religious dynamics, so too does the process of sublimation, in which people flee from the particular and physical, subject as it is to decay, and recoil from what reminds them of the grossness of the body. Yearning to identify with the eternal rather than the temporal, we reach for the intellect and the universal concepts at its command. To transcend the limitations of the personal, we employ abstraction; to overcome the power of instinct, we enlist reason. Our desire to rise above has powered some of our greatest religious and philosophical insights, just as our desire to perfect the world has driven some of our greatest innovations in law and technology, but our search for transcendence has also alienated us from ourselves. It has driven the antagonism toward the carnal that is part of so many religious traditions and has fueled a powerful collective shadow. Edinger notes that "modern individuals have had entirely too much sublimatio"; usually, we require more help with landing than with taking off.

COAGULATIO. While sublimation is a necessary operation for those who are overidentified with the body and trapped by desire, most people have a greater need for coagulation, to come back down to earth and make peace with the particulars of their lives and their bodies. We are not abstractions, no matter how much we try to be. Clearly, the alchemist could not do much with dry ash or invisible vapor, no matter how pure, just as we cannot put our ideals into motion if we can't enter into and live in the world. In the journey of transformation, every time we break ourselves down, the inevitable next step will be to reform ourselves. We then test this new form in the world to see how it stands up, and when it begins to restrict or block us, we must break it down again, but only so we can begin the process of building ourselves anew. We must always coagulate to function. The earth we so despise is what we most need.

MORTIFICATIO. Ultimately, any process of transformation is a process of death and rebirth. A substance is first "killed" in its original form, then subjected to decay and ferment. Its structure is collapsed and its constituent parts separate. We are intensely afraid of this decomposition and our resistance to it paradoxically becomes a source of self-destruction. We do not wish to die, and in trying to avoid death, we neglect to live. Willingly subjecting ourselves to experiences that involve an inner death can help us come to understand bodily death and fear it less. Spiritual awakenings can feel like death, as can individuation in therapy. Any time life requires of us a metamorphosis, it brings us through a death process, a shedding of an old form, persona, or way of living in the world. While the ego will never be able to accept its fragility and temporality, we can come to accept death in understanding that it is the only way for the world to be renewed. Nature teaches us that what appears to die is born again; instinct and memory keep alive the old ways of animal and human ancestors, and nature perpetually renews itself on a yearly feast of death. Given

time and more work, material appears in a new form, carrying in it something of what came before.

CONIUNCTIO. It turns out the greatest insight I took away from this book is the same as the greatest insight I took away from James Joyce's *Ulysses*: in all things, there are seeming contradictions that cannot be fully resolved into one another; we cease to know things as they really are when we try to force them to fit into the confines of a single, simple conclusion or view. The more easily we can shift from one perspective or mode to another, the more fully we can see. The more of its countless faces and facets we can hold in consciousness at once, the more truly we can know the world. In trying to reduce things to an undifferentiated unity, we kill them, even as what motivates us is the desire for light, life, and good to conquer darkness, death, and evil. We know the perfection of the world not by melting it down, but by becoming a clear mirror that can reflect it as it is. The opus is realized when sun and moon, male and female, all that is seemingly contradictory, solidifies into a form in which these elements are unified but distinct, neither heterogeneous nor with one subsumed in the other. The Philosopher's Stone is a new substance that contains nothing that was not originally there. Dark and light, male and female, good and evil, pure and impure--these dualities are in some ways a trick of the mind, but we can only see beyond them when we stop trying to reduce or eliminate them. We only truly know ourselves when we stop excluding vital parts of ourselves from our conscious awareness and trapping them in our shadow. The individuated, realized person is conscious of her multiplicity. She is vital because none of her energies are blocked off. The lamb and the wolf in her do not have to battle. The wolf might eat the lamb sometimes, but she lets it be; the lamb is always reborn. She has an unconscious, but she is open, and listens; she lets it bubble up into her conscious mind; she looks into the darkness and sees, and is not afraid.

Kate Knowles says

Reading this book was very transformative for me. You can transform in your own life if you pick a personal issue (prima materia) in your life, choose an artistic medium to work with, and take your art through the various alchemical processes. Working with the material facilitates psychic transformation and openings in your life. Having a support group to support you as you go through the process is recommended. Alchemy is a beautiful tool and this book is brilliant. You learn about and work with the earth elements, water, fire, earth, sky, death, birth, ect.

David says

A very good introduction into alchemy as a language describing the psyche and the process of Individuation. I especially liked the last two chapters on Separatio and Coniunctio. Separatio, the division into two, distinguishing of opposites, the creating a space through differentiation for the conscious ego to exist. The Coniunctio, the Individuation, the bringing together of the opposites, the awareness by the conscious (ego) of the unconscious, bringing about a reciprocal reaction from the unconscious (Self) in a combined effort to find a more meaningful life. Together bringing about more consciousness in the Universe.

Kenzie says

The subject matter is so vast that books on the subject of alchemy inevitably feel disorganized, but Edinger nonetheless supplies much to reflect on.

I had trouble with the section on Separatio, which seemed to endorse a dualism that doesn't really fit with how I experience mind/body. And as with many Jungian books, I felt like the psychology of women gets short shrift.

Besides these complaints, I really enjoyed how Edinger connected a variety of symbols to the development of the psyche. I have a lot of pages folded down.
