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We live in an age in which spiritual searching and seeking is more common, particularly among the youth. The need for answers and solutions to a world in danger of dying, of a society in which corruption and decay are so transparently obvious, leads many on paths which are dangerous and uncharted. The metaphor of journey, the practice of pilgrimage, the art of navigation, all contain the notion of process and movement rather than stagnation. They provide us with tools to not only emerge whole from experiences which have the power to break and shatter us but to provide maps for others to use.

The title, ‘Too Much Light: The Art of The Hero’s Journey’, reflects the experience of Spiritual Crisis of both Karen Adler and Teresa McLaren. This phenomenon is little known in Western society and is most easily understood as an extreme emotional state with symptoms such as loss of contact with consensual reality, delusions and hallucinations which are similar to those labelled psychosis (Grof & Grof, 1989; Phillips et al. 2009).

Stories of Too Much Light, becoming lost and ultimately finding one's way back to health, happiness and sanity via the arts and The Hero’s Journey archetype, are shared by many in the world today. It is a common initiation story in very disparate cultures and among very different individuals. The commonalities of these stories serve to illustrate the underlying connectedness of who we are as human beings.

Stories and artworks by those who have survived these experiences encourage others to listen to and benefit from the deep wisdom, beauty and strength that reside in all of us. We hope that lay people, academics and members of the mental health professions will use this resource as a source of explanation and understanding for experiences which are deeply disturbing, quite often terrifying but ultimately life-enhancing. Marie Grace Brook writes that knowing about these experiences have ‘Implications for spiritual tourism and pilgrimage … both for the purpose of supporting people in their spiritual[ly] transformative journeys, and for normalizing characteristic extreme states mimicking psychosis that potentially accompany powerful spiritual experience’ (Brook 2020:1).

Key Words: transformation, journey, spiritual crisis, pilgrimage

Introduction

Pilgrimage, spiritual tourism, art, storytelling, journeys all have a common denominator—movement. Making art in any of its forms enables movement within the psyche, it can stir things up and reveal both treasures and nightmares that have been long hidden or suppressed. Making a pilgrimage necessitates movement in its most basic form—walking, being in contact with the earth, becoming more aware of the natural rhythms inherent in life. Both enhance the mind-body connection, connect us with our internal world and thereby bring about a more holistic way of dealing with both ourselves and with life.

The psychological movement made possible by art-making, the physical movement of pilgrimage, combined with the art therapy premise that art makes the unconscious, conscious is a powerful and effective combination through which to view states of consciousness and transformational experiences which are routinely pathologized and medicated due to ignorance.

This photo essay illustrates the great power of art and storytelling to both heal and to bring understanding to extreme states of consciousness which are difficult to grasp on a purely intellectual level. The images illustrate the very personal—but also universal because of their connections to spirituality and mythology—
journeys of Karen Adler and Teresa McLaren. They tell the stories of our experience of Spiritual Crisis which is often misdiagnosed by the predominant biomedical model as madness and mental illness. Combining these images plus the stories they contain with mythologist, Joseph Campbell’s, archetype of The Hero’s Journey (see Appendix 1) provides us with a deep, multi-layered, cross-cultural means of understanding this phenomenon which changes lives, having the potential to both create and destroy life. The Hero’s Journey is viewed by many as a universal archetype—i.e. a recurrent symbol or motif in literature, art, or mythology (Joseph Campbell Foundation, accessed 2020). We use it as a mode of explication that is useful for unpacking meaning in our artworks. Appendix 2 presents examples of cross-cultural, historic examples of The Hero’s Journeys which are relevant to and have informed our own journeys of transformation.

Contemporary philosopher, Alain de Botton, states that ‘The question of what art is for has for too long been needlessly treated as obscure: it is to help us live and die.’ (de Botton 2014:1) The language of art is the language of symbolism and metaphor with all its multiplicity of meanings and interpretations, connections that hold true through both time and space.

As stated by Quinn, ‘Travellers take ownership of a woeful past to alleviate the pains of injury.’ Talking particularly about the Great Irish Famine, known as An Gorta Mór, she suggests that:

... they visit the sites where the horrendous events occurred, witness their aftermaths, and participate in a shared recuperation. This is how the past becomes present; it is also how pilgrimage fulfills one of its promises to become transformative on personal, communal, and global levels. These pilgrims enact an ancient tradition of journeying to a place of historic and cultural hurt as a way of both honouring and healing (Quinn 2018:98).

In a similar vein, the authors of this paper have created artworks that symbolise times and places on their own inner journeys as ways to both honour and heal from experiences which changed the trajectory of their lives and led to them travelling different paths than they intended. This is the basis of this paper—i.e. that artworks have the capacity to tell stories from that deep place within us that has connections to Jung’s collective unconscious.

In Jungian psychology, the [collective unconscious is that] part of the unconscious mind which is derived from ancestral memory and experience and is common to all humankind, as distinct from the individual’s unconscious (New Oxford American Dictionary 2020).

Thus, such works of art, derived from the unconscious are ‘transformative’ in the same sense that pilgrimage is transformative.

**Purpose**

Because of the hybrid nature of this paper, we have merged several paradigms or ways of viewing the world which combine different qualitative and art-based research methods. These are autoethnography, case study, art therapy and material anthropology.

According to Maréchal (2010:1),

*Autoethnography is a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic fieldwork and writing.*

For the purposes of our paper in the IJRTP, this is a perfect accompaniment to art therapy processes which are designed to elicit storytelling from deeper levels than are apparent on the surface of any piece of creation. This is achieved by recognition of the symbolic level of art, its connections to the unconscious and knowing that these levels can be discovered via amplification.

*Amplification [is] delving into something deeper, perhaps by exaggerating it, repeating it, making it bigger* (Berlingieri 2006:7)

Material anthropology is the study of artifacts from a multi-directional, multi-dimensional approach so that the personal, societal, historic, economic and spiritual factors are taken into account when viewing any object that has been created. When we view artworks using these different but complementary lenses, we discover aspects of the individual which link their internal worlds to the external world and explain often incomprehensible behaviours.

When viewed through the non-ethnocentric lens which Anthropology champions, these artworks enable connections to cross-cultural storytelling. Consequently, a different story emerges than the one which is imposed by western medicine and the viewing / hearing of these stories via the biomedical lens. As mental health and mental ‘illness’ are interpreted so very differently in different cultures, and the consequences of misinterpreting behaviours as
Symptoms are so very dire, the application of methods which enable deeper, more complex listening is required.

Attendance at International Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage (IRTP) conferences, in addition to reviewing literature about pilgrimage has yielded a number of examples of what we are attempting to convey with our stories. For example, a book chapter by Kalian and Witztum (2017) who are both retired mental health professionals discusses their professional experiences with Jerusalem Syndrome, which can seriously impact the behaviour of pilgrims to Jerusalem. A fellow attendee at a conference told me of her experience with Dutch pilgrims to Jerusalem, some of whom end up believing they are Jesus and need to be flown home to Holland by their embassy. This phenomenon is known as Jerusalem Syndrome and has been immortalised in the TV show, The Simpsons. Another attendee told me about Stendhal Syndrome, which is a condition brought about by exposure to objects or phenomena of great beauty. All of these are examples of extreme states of consciousness which is what both authors have experienced and have worked their way through via the arts.

Illumination: The Arts and Healing

Illumination was an art exhibition / education forum, curated by Karen Adler, in collaboration with the Hardys Bay Church Easter Festival in Australia. The event was designed to complement the Easter tradition symbolism of renewal and celebration which would offer rich opportunities of exploration via the arts, plus psychological and cross-cultural perspectives. The works depicted how art-making as visual storytelling has helped the artists through crises and enabled them to emerge stronger and wiser. The works also illustrated a placemaking, navigational concept which has its roots in all cultures and is of immense benefit when attempting to understand extreme states of consciousness, often misdiagnosed as mental illnesses. This concept is The Hero's Journey. Knowledge of this concept enables a person to be more aware of where they are—physically, emotionally, spiritually—in a crisis and enables them to move forward. Translating this concept into visual form enables a more concrete, visceral understanding of this important navigational aspect of the psyche.

The two suites of artworks which follow were part of the ‘Illumination’ exhibition.
This first image has the storytelling introduction, *Once Upon a Time* to remind me that every story has a narrative structure—a beginning, middle and an end—and that is the innate intelligence of The Hero’s Journey, a sense of movement, of flow, of unfreezing. In the language of The Hero’s Journey, and with what I now know as opposed to what I knew about life thirty years ago when this happened to me, the image represents innocence, not-knowing, not-seeing, being blind and uninformed, uninformed, uninitiated. It has a sense of the Fool in the Tarot pack ready to step off the cliff into the unknown. The snowflakes represent the great diversity of ways in which Spiritual Crisis manifests but also that it has a recognisable shape and form. The snowflakes also symbolise the part of me that has remained frozen for more than three decades. The figure itself, in comparison with those that follow, has a tabula rasa feeling to it, and contains the recognition that this experience changed and shaped my life in ways which took me decades to understand and accept.
The Nadir is also known as The Dark Night of the Soul as identified by St John of the Cross. It is the most terrifying, the most life-threatening stage of The Hero’s Journey. There is a deep sense of loss of all that is meaningful and good in the world, the personality can shatter and splinter into a million pieces, there is the risk of suicide because of the extreme forces erupting from the unconscious, both personal and collective. It is the place I came to and inhabited in my life as a result of the loss of love, grief, an overload of spirituality, an endless seeking for answers in comparative religions. I became ‘skinless’, newborn, with no boundaries, no separate sense of self between myself and others. It is the place where, if one does not ask for help, one is in danger of death, of drowning. The difficulty is that if one asks for help at this point of greatest vulnerability, from someone unaware of Spiritual Crisis, one’s life can swiftly become that of a lifelong mental health patient. The extreme nature of this state of consciousness—visions, delusions, hallucinations, hearing voices—means that a state which is transient is often misdiagnosed as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, i.e. in biomedical terms, a lifelong brain disease requiring medication with antipsychotics.

The image itself has a sense of battling with dark forces. This can be interpreted as one’s own inner demons but also as a recognition of the existence of those forces which are integral parts of the world’s religions—the devil, djinn, hungry ghosts, ancestor spirits etc. There is also a recognition of the Shadow in Jungian psychology, that part of ourselves which we hide from others and from ourselves as unacceptable, which we mask and suppress but which ultimately seeps through, especially at times of great stress. The halo effect and the Arabic script enable me to be mindful of the cross-cultural nature of these experiences and that this richness can be drawn from to enable deeper, more meaningful connections, both internal and external. As is also the case, I believe, with the nature of pilgrimage.
The rings symbolise the alchemical marriage, that Jungian concept of individuation, the union of opposites, which experience once tore me apart rather than bringing me wholeness. They remind me to treat this process with great respect, an understanding that has been hard-won.

Home represents that place of coming home to myself, being whole, being at home in my body, in the world, in the here and now. The image—and the realisations that have come with it—gives me a sense of relief and of comfort, of softness, of early morning birdsong and celebrating a new day. Contrasted with the first image, Once Upon A Time, it gives me a sense of completion, of having completed a journey to the best of my ability but with no need for perfection. The person in the image has a deeper state of knowing, she is able to see both internally and externally, to recognise the impact of her internal world on the external world.
This image (Adam and Eve) represents one of the extreme states I experienced during my Spiritual Emergence which became a Spiritual Crisis. In transpersonal psychology, Spiritual Emergence is viewed as a natural phenomenon of gradually opening up to God, to Spirit. This is similar to what many pilgrims are seeking when they embark on a pilgrimage—a deeper connection with God. This emergence can become an emergency if the opening is too rapid or if there are complications—e.g. lack of cultural context, lack of community, no support structures, drugs, unaddressed trauma.

In transpersonal psychology terms, an over-identification with Eve (as happened in my case where I believed myself to have been Eve and the man I loved at the time, Adam) is representative of a psychological renewal through return to the centre. (Perry 1974:65) In western psychiatric terms, an over-identification with spiritual figures is often pathologised and seen as symptomatic of mental illness—e.g. many people diagnosed with schizophrenia have seen themselves as Jesus, Mary, Buddha etc. This image is a great gift to myself and a very welcome validation of how I now see the world in relation to loving and being loved. The journey from the past, a time and place in my life where I was very broken, to a present where I am whole and healthy would not have been accomplished without the insight and understanding that the arts bestow. Becoming an artist has enabled me to view the world very differently, to be able to make connections that I would never have been able to make without some measure of developing my own art of pilgrimage and transformation.
Teresa McLaren’s Journey of Transformation

Illumination is an art form of decorating a book or manuscript with designs in colour and gold or silver. I also think of these illuminations as shedding new light on past darkness and as being relevant to the idea of spiritual enlightenment. The images and symbols were taken from artwork I had done at points in my life that I eventually came to see as marking important external places on my inner transformative journey into adulthood and motherhood. In 2018, these works were redone with gilded gold and watercolour paint. The basic structure of The Hero’s Journey—a call to adventure, descent, initiation and return—is reflected in this series of illuminations.
Other symbols in this painting are that of Icarus, the figure in Greek mythology who plunges into the sea after disobeying his father’s warning not to fly too close to the sun with wax-wings. There is also the Ouroboros, an ancient symbol of renewal, and the ancient Chinese yin yang symbol. I believe I included these symbols to represent the balance of opposites. At the time, I felt out of balance, that I had flown too close to the ‘sun’ and yet there is still the promise of renewal.

**Ophelia Drowning** was done in the hospital during my first psychiatric/spiritual crisis in January 2003. Ophelia was the maiden driven mad by grief who drowned herself in Shakespeare’s play *The Tragedy of Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*. When I first made the image, it embarrassed me. Years later when I discovered John Weir Perry’s concept of Psychological Renewal (Grof & Grof, 1989; Perry, 1974), I saw the power in the image and its symbols that I used during this time of incredible distress and confusion.

Ophelia holds a poppy in her hand. I later realised much of my distress at that time was grappling with the erratic behaviour of my roommate and my concern over his drug use, including prescription opioids. I was very close to finishing my degree in Biomedical Communications, a likely career option for me was working in the pharmaceutical field, and I struggled with the ethics around pharmaceutical promotions and advertising.

**Ophelia Drowning** as a painting represents my departure or call to adventure on my journey as an artist. Her value was not immediately recognised by myself or anyone else around me while I was in crisis. It is only now, years later, that I can interpret what I was trying to say through the symbols I used.
Poseidon’s offspring, leapt out of her body. She had been unable to birth them as a monster. Another mythic and symbolic reminder of renewal.

In this new version, I painted Medusa holding the staff of Asclepius. Asclepius was the first great physician of Greek mythology and his snake-entwined staff remains the symbol of medicine today. To the Ancient Greeks, snakes were sacred beings of wisdom, healing and resurrection. Snakes were believed to know the secrets of the earth and often told Asclepius the causes and cures of his patients’ diseases. I had also read that Asclepius used Gorgon blood to bring back people from death, thus enraging the Fates and Hades. Zeus killed Asclepius with a thunderbolt but his father, Apollo, had Zeus immortalise him by turning him into a constellation of stars in the night sky. I found this story powerful, a cautionary tale to use medicinal knowledge wisely and to know and accept the limits of modern medicine.

The original Medusa was a collage with yarn, puzzle pieces and magazine cut-outs created in the hospital in April 2003. It was based on my anger and invalidation at being given an EEG when I attempted to explain the mystical experiences I was having and was consequently put on bipolar medications. The wires of the EEG reminded me of the Greek monster Medusa with snakes growing from my skull.

Medusa is the famous snake-haired Gorgon monster of Greek mythology, a beautiful woman who was turned into a monster by the Goddess Athena as punishment for consorting with Poseidon. Medusa was said to be able to turn people to stone with just a glance. Medusa represents for me the dark feminine, a justified-female-anger, a feeling of betrayal by the Gods. As an art piece in my journey, she represents the descent and the nadir or the lowest point where all seems lost. When the hero Perseus cut off Medusa’s head using his shield as a mirror, The brothers, Pegasus and Chysaor, Poseidon’s offspring, leapt out of her body. She had been unable to birth them as a monster. Another mythic and symbolic reminder of renewal.

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In an effort to heal from a spiritual crisis in late 2012 and what felt like the disintegration of my professional identity as a medical illustrator, I enrolled in a Sacred Arts course. During the week-long summer course, we learned the techniques and history of illumination while working on an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. At that time, my first child was two, I was pregnant with my second and my grandmother had recently passed away. I was looking for ways to mark these life transitions and mourn. *Viridissima Virga*, which is based on my original painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe, is a term used by Saint Hildegard of Bingen for the Virgin Mary. For me, it refers to how this healing sacred feminine figure blooms perennially in various cultures.

While working slowly and intensely on this image of the Virgin Mary for a week, gilding the precious metals, grinding the pigments for colour, transforming earthly matter into something more sacred, I felt the presence of this patient divine Mother supporting me, I felt the presence of my ancestors cheering me on, I felt for the first time in a long time that creation through the arts was a sacred act, a gift I was meant to share with the world. *Viridissima Virga* represents the Return on my journey, to my new life in all its living ‘greenness’ as a mother and an artist.
The original Transcendence was created in 2015. I was beginning to reframe my experiences as one of (a rocky) transition, spiritual awakening and emergence into adulthood and then into motherhood. I was still, however, trying to find my way out of a patronising and pathologizing mental health system. Much of the work I needed to do was to find my grounding again. In Transcendence, I incorporate the Celtic knotwork I had been learning along with gilding. The elements of air, water, fire and earth are represented as are the Eastern concepts of chakras and kundalini. I had been exploring cross-cultural references to dragons and represented the dragon as a Celtic serpent and earth spirit. Transcendence is a representation of Return in my journey and the completed transformation. It reminds me of what I have been through and what I have to bring back to my community.
Conclusion

Jungian analyst and poet, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, states that:

*Art is important for it commemorates the seasons of the soul, or a special or tragic event in the soul’s journey. Art is not just for one’s self, not just a marker of one’s own understanding. It is also a map for those who follow after us* (Pinkola Estes 1992:14).

It is in this spirit that we have told our stories in both words and images so that connections are woven from internal landscape to external pilgrimage and the maps we have made can be read by others. There are profound connections between spirituality and psychology, as there are profound connections between the body, the soul and the mind. These myriad connections are most apparent when we tell the stories of our lives in ways which mirror ancient, cross-cultural storytelling patterns or paths.

Pilgrimages are undertaken for particular purposes, one of which is to enable the pilgrim to know themselves. Few end their pilgrimage without a deeper knowing and understanding of who they are. The deepest knowing often comes from the darkest places on our journeys. We have attempted to highlight and connect those aspects of pilgrimage, art and storytelling which we have found most useful in being able to navigate our way through experiences which can be both creative and destructive. It is at these crossroads or thresholds where most care needs to be taken so that transformation takes place and continuation is assured. This is as true in the inner world of emotions stirred up by trauma, grief, conflict as it is in the external world of pilgrimage.

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Appendix 1: The Archetypal Pattern of The Hero’s Journey

The Hero’s Journey enables us to look at the darkest moments of our lives from the perspective of a universal archetype and realise that these experiences have a definite shape and form which is ultimately beneficial and growth-producing. The most perilous part of the Hero’s Journey - but also the most pregnant with possibilities – is the Nadir where psychological death, rebirth, transformation takes place. It is most important here not to confuse psychological, spiritual death / rebirth with physical death.

The archetypal pattern of The Hero’s Journey is:

1. A place, time and characters are described - as normal, settled, peaceful, in good order.

2. Then crisis occurs - a giant, a plague, a witch … illness, grief, trauma etc.

3. What follows is a descent, a collapse of the reality which has prevailed. This is described in metaphors - the falling / the fall, being lost, darkness, ignorance, heaviness, illness, chaos.

4. Nadir - where ultimate chaos, dissolution and even death [bodily and / or spiritually] may occur. It is at this point that most care needs to be taken. Transformation is the desired goal but for some people who are not aware of this as a process, the pressures are so extreme, that suicide is considered.

5. Then there is a turning point where guidance is received, power returns, gifts are bestowed and upward movement ensues.

6. What follows the turning point is the discovery of the pathway to return or renewal – rising, finding the way, illumination, knowledge, gnosis, lightness, health / well-being, order.

The world returns to its original order or a new order is created or found.

Appendix 2: Historic and Cross-cultural Examples of The Hero’s Journey:

The following are historical and cross-cultural examples of The Hero’s Journey:

- Shamanic initiation
- Wounded Healer archetype (Chiron)
- Epic of Gilgamesh 2800-2004 BCE
- Homer’s Odyssey, Early 7th Century BCE
- Jesus Christ, the Apostles creed ‘…was crucified, died and was buried … descended into hell, on the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven’
- Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) Polymath, mystic, visionary
- St Francis of Assisi (1181/82 -1226)
- Dante Alighieri, c1308-1320 Commedia (Inferno, Purgatorio, Paradiso)
- St Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) Devotion of Heart, Devotion of Peace, Devotion of Union, Devotion of Ecstasy
- St John of the Cross (1542-1591) Dark Night of the Soul, Spiritual Crisis
- Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) Waldorf Education, Anthroposophy
- Anton Boison (1876-1965) – Chaplain in psych hospital, psychosis as problems of the soul

Separation => Nadir / Transformation / Transition => Return