

Depression Summit Feb 2023

“Depression and the Healing Power of Nature”

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Introduction:

Depression is usually described as a loss of meaning, a lack of self-worth, a mood of hopelessness and despair often associated with feelings of anxiety, and sleep disruptions (too much or too little) and weight gain or loss.

From a Jungian perspective, the lack of energy and listlessness usually indicate that the psychic energy or libido (sexual and life energy) has withdrawn from the ego or conscious self into the unconscious. And from this perspective, all symptoms, including those associated with depression, are considered meaningful; that is, they have a prospective character, indicating that the feelings of loss, sadness and futility suggest that a new development in the personality, and a broader expansion of consciousness, is needed for the future unfolding of life. In other words, nature, your nature, wishes for you to become even more of who you truly are.

Jung identified several levels of the psyche:

*the *ego* level is that of which we are aware;

*below that the *personal unconscious* where shadow elements felt to be unacceptable, and unacknowledged creative aspects of the individual are hidden, often related to early relationships and wounds associated with parental and family members, or unexamined societal norms;

*then, *historical and cultural* levels of the psyche need to be taken into account – this relates to where we were born, what cultural context, what years did we grow up in, what gender we are, etc.

*then, what he calls the *archetypal* unconscious, where universal patterns and cross-cultural elements in the psyche, not relating to our personal lives specifically, can be found and seen very often in dreams, visions, and fantasies. For Jung, *myths and symbols* are the ‘language’ of this level as they provide a universal context for our experience that can be both healing – we no longer feel so alone – and a broadening of our personalities into new possibilities and potentials.

Jung also used the *myth of alchemy* as a container for the forces of transformation initiated by depression, to show how depression can be the ‘wake up call’ to a more creative and life-giving future.

*Finally the level beneath the archetypal and collective level where psyche and matter intersect producing synchronicities and other subtle phenomena.

So, when we deal with any presenting problem – and here we are discussing depression – these different levels of the psyche will need to be explored and their various influences – in childhood and other memories, images, fantasies, feelings, patterns of behaviour, and dreams – on the feelings of depression examined.

However, for the purposes of my contribution to the discussion, I would like to specifically focus on the questions, ‘what exactly is depressed?’ and reflect on the larger current cultural issues that I feel are also contributing to the pervasive feelings of depression amongst so many individuals at this time.

If we look around our world, we are dealing with ongoing wars, dysfunctional institutions, and ecological and economic crises – these can be overwhelming as our psyches are pumped with death and disaster scenarios every time we turn our computers or TVs on, or go to the movies. In addition, we live in a ‘one size fits all technological society where individual opinions are often suppressed, and exceptions are not allowed. Is it any wonder that so many people are wracked with fear, a sense of not being heard or seen, and a loss of meaning? Mostly we can feel completely helpless about how to deal with these worldly problems and can be easily overwhelmed by them.

I would say, given this, *depression is a healthy reaction* to what seems like unsolvable despair not only within, but around us too.

So, I would like to look specifically at the ecological and environmental catastrophes that we are in the midst of, and situate these within a larger pattern of the astrological changing of the ages from the Era of Pisces to that of Aquarius. I would then like to suggest that the reweaving of our relationship to the Earth through meditative walking (or pilgrimage), can help us both understand, and do something manageable and practical with our depressive state. I will give an example from my own life to illustrate this. I wish to show that our collective separation from a felt connection to nature *has suppressed our sense of the sacred* which has contributed to so many individual and cultural problems in our time, and robbed us of who we truly are.

About these astrological changes, Jung has written:

“A mood of universal **destruction and renewal** has set its mark on our age. This mood makes itself felt everywhere, politically, socially, and philosophically. We are living in what the Greeks called the Kairos – the right moment – for a “metamorphosis of the gods,” of the fundamental principles and symbols.”
(Jung, C. G., *The Undiscovered Self, CW 10, Civilization in Transition*, p. 304)

Our civilization is going through a symbolic ‘death and rebirth’ process. Is it any wonder that individuals too are feeling this disintegration of the familiar and need for new values and growth?

Alchemy describes depression as the *nigredo*, the “black blacker than black,” a chaotic state that involves confusion, darkness, defeat, and a feeling that everything has died.

It is often thought of as the beginning of an unfolding journey that moves through various stages – one in which our fixed attitudes are subjected to dissolution, a release of buried emotion (‘shadow’ – neglected aspects of ourselves), and through a relationship with a therapist of care and understanding, can eventuate in a transformation that brings growth, and restores our relationship to ourselves, to nature, and to the larger cosmos, putting our sense of reality on a broader foundation in which we can discover more of the meaning of our maturing life.

Our culture and its values are going through a *nigredo* – as we can see around us and as Jung speaks of above.

Example: how I discovered the healing power of nature.

Despairing about my life, feeling change was required, not knowing what that was, and feeling overwhelmed by ecological and environmental disasters.

But at that time, I had a dream, a dream in which a snake showed me the inner workings of energy and the deeper innate wisdom of the body and natural world. I worked on the dream, writing down my associations and feelings about it.

However, along with my feelings of depression, I felt I couldn’t only work intuitively and in an introverted fashion with the dream as usual; I needed to get my body out on the earth, following the wisdom of the serpent in my dream. So, I started walking on long hikes, not having any plan, but seeing what happened.

After a couple of months, during one of my hikes on the mountain that I was regularly going to, I had this uncanny feeling of connecting with the spirit of the mountain – it just seemed to come naturally. So, I expressed this feeling quietly to the mountain, and out of a calm, still, hot day, a huge wind blew up and around me, and then died down, and I felt I had been responded to. It felt like magic.

That experience both encouraged and convinced me to go on a longer Pilgrimage walk which, soon after, I planned and did.

I walked for almost two weeks, solo, on a pilgrimage route in France. Like the more well-known Spanish pilgrimage route, this one was also called a “Camino de Compostella,” that means a “path under the stars;” in other words, a soul journey. Such pilgrimages have been undertaken for hundreds if not thousands of years, and

individuals and groups would walk in order to seek healing or clarification of life's suffering and other issues, and there are various ways and sometimes rituals that are encouraged as you make such a journey along the path.

I had a host of concerns that I was carrying, but I also consciously decided to make my walk in service to the earth as my very small, but practical, contribution to environmental issues. So, I walked not in a conventional religious sense, but as a meditation. I had many experiences along the way, and I would try to be aware of the animals, trees, rocks, birds, flowers, fields, rivers, and church bells, that I met or passed by, taking notice of their presence, the various sounds, smells, and atmospheres. I wanted to notice nature and extend my feelings and consciousness to her. As I walked, I also breathed out my despair, and inhaled blessings and love. What I noticed over the time was that the lengthy and often challenging days of walking – between roughly 12 and 18 miles a day, (20km and more), and one day after another, up hills, across farm and wilderness areas, down into river valleys, through villages – was that my normal ego consciousness started to break down, and at the same time, many other senses began to wake up. I became aware of the world around me in a heightened fashion as the life in everything I saw and felt woke up around me. I began to lose complete focus on all my worries, such that I couldn't really remember what they were by the end. But simultaneously, my heart began to open in a new way, such that, despite long physically arduous days of walking I often felt joyful, even filled with gratitude for the beauty all around me. By the time I reached my destination, an ancient medieval village with a beautiful Romanesque cathedral in it, I 'knew' in my heart that the earth did not only want to be fretted over, but she also wants to be loved. When we love the earth, the earth loves us back, and our hearts are opened. With the well-known writer, Paulo Coelho, as he observes in his first book, *The Pilgrimage*, in the end you don't walk the Camino, the Camino walks you! I began to appreciate why for so many centuries people have followed these ancient walking meditations; they really are soul journeys – they heal you in ways you do not anticipate, and once you experience your heart opening, other intuitions and guidance comes to you. (Jung had observed how synchronicities also produce a feeling of interconnectedness, where matter, nature can act as guide and a healing force.) For me, this resulted in a big change in my life, whereby I began to design and lead my own pilgrimages. I drew on my Jungian background, linking visits to sacred sites with their symbolic and mythic background, and included working with dreams and other experiences with participants along the way, to develop a rich tapestry of experience with the intention of creating grounded and meaningful change in people's visions for their lives.

Now, I am aware that pilgrimage might not be available or even appeal to all people. However, we can all find places in nature, whether it's our back garden, or local town park, or even imagining such places. The main issue is to renew our **felt** relationship with the natural world. What I wish to suggest is that in the healing of our suffering – and for sure, psychotherapy is often essential for this process – that the deeper streams of our malaise, are not neglected. In the times we live in, which are not only personal, inner and outer events are in a huge process of death and rebirth, of disintegration and restoration on a new level. Along with these huge changes, we need to restore our relationship with the earth. For indigenous peoples, the earth is our Mother, she provides the sustenance and 'food' for our bodies and souls, but we need to honour and respect her. Not endlessly rape and use her resources for our greed and materialistic purposes. This, as we can see all too clearly, has brought us dangerously near extinction. So, our attitudes must change. Change is often really difficult because things need to die before the new pattern can be born.

The Age of Pisces involved the devolution of wisdom, women, the feminine imagination and soul in men and women, and the health of our earth. It gave birth to duality thinking, reason, the development of the intellect and technology. Now we need to link our reason with our feelings and spiritual sides. It's time to return to a more sacred respect for the whole of life, a feeling of unity within us and with our planet, born out of a careful differentiation of opposites. As alchemy puts it, "the new energy is a union of Sun and Moon, of the masculine and feminine within our nature, the marriage between inner and outer, ourselves and nature, and our reconnection with the stars" – but with awareness. Through your suffering, and efforts and courage to pay attention to depression and where it can take you, the gradual embodiment of new energy and creative potentials, will contribute to changing the world also.

Jungian astrologer, Alice Howell, puts it this way:

"The Age of Aquarius will involve the true discovery of the Divine Guest within us, and with it the need to recognize this in all people and in nature, as well: it will be the dialectic/dialogue of the individual and the cosmos...a deep understanding of the interdependence of all life...the *unus mundus* [unified world] of the mystics and the alchemists...the re-emergence of [Hagia] Sophia, the feminine wisdom hidden in nature and in us."

Howell, Alice O., *Jungian synchronicity in astrological signs and ages* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1995), pp. 207-2