

Images, Transformative Learning and the Work of Soul

While studying for his GED math test, Mitch became frustrated, threw his pencil, angrily pushed back his chair and remarked, "I can't get this stuff. I would rather be doing pottery. That would be something!" In a course on adult learning, Marie discovered a reading on adult development theory that was helping her to understand what had been going on in her life. Finally, at the conclusion of a collaborative learning workshop, a middle-aged woman who had been with the community college for many years observed, "Dr. Dirkx, I really like these ideas and can see how they would be useful to our learners. But," she continued with resignation in her voice, "we simply don't have the time or resources in our classes to do all these things you suggest."

These scenarios demonstrate that subject matter can evoke deeply personal responses among adult learners, which manifests in distinctive emotional reactions. They illustrate that what adults learn is fundamentally grounded in the way they think about themselves and their worlds, opening possibilities for transformation and creating dramatic shifts in one's consciousness. As is often the case with transformation theory, educators interpret such statements literally and regard them as inherently rational, intentional and largely conscious.

What if our thoughts about such reactions were regarded as fantasies or products of the learners' imaginations? Grounded in post-Jungian thought (Samuels, 1985) and the world of soul (Hillman, 1975, 2000; Moore, 1996), this article covers an approach to understanding and facilitating transformative learning in which emotional reactions to the text are regarded as imagistic manifestations of inner selves. Hillman (2000) and Moore

refer to the act of learning to work with images that populate thoughts, feelings and actions as "soul work," which is critical to personal transformation (Dirkx, 2001).

The Self and Other in Transformative Learning

Post-Jungian scholars theorize humans to be constituted by a conscious waking self in dynamic interaction with a powerful unconscious. Although we usually identify with the waking self, the unconscious is very powerful in shaping consciousness. The unconscious is made up of clusters of psychic energy or "selves" that, at different times and situations, populate and shape the waking self (Watkins, 2000) and make up the total personality. People embody all these selves, their relationships with each other and the relationships they each have with others in the outer world. Within any given situation, we unconsciously identify with, and unknowingly act for, one or more of these selves.

In the opening vignettes, learners expressed particular selves that reflect certain aspects of their unconscious with the outer conscious world. Some "thing" or "other" within the learning environment is evoking certain energies within their unconscious that express aspects of a particular unconscious self. This "other" can be frustration with a math problem, a vision of what it means to be a teacher or excitement in developmental stories. Depending on the situation in which they find themselves, a different sense of the "other" will be encountered, different energies constellated and different "selves" expressed. When doing pottery, Mitch may become a self-confident and contented artisan as opposed to an angry GRE taker. In her classroom, the aforementioned

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community college teacher might move fluidly and with grace among her academically underprepared students. Lastly, Marie's discovery of developmental theory might be at a loss how to share this growing excitement with her family.

The learner's interaction with the text often leads to expression of one or more of these inner "selves." When consciously realized, these expressions can lead to a more clear recognition and differentiation of the various "selves" that populate the learner's being. Vague emotions and feelings that seem to haunt the waking consciousness become more differentiated and fully elaborated. Learners can recognize and name these various states, such as joy, anger, sadness or excitement. Eventually, the learner may see how these states are expressions of who they are in relationship to various forms of the inner and outer "other."

The emergence of these inner selves in consciousness does not occur in a consciously intentional or reflective manner. Rather, they usually appear spontaneously as if they have minds of their own. This analogy is fairly accurate as clusters of psychic energy are thought to be largely autonomous entities in our personality. People sometimes surprise themselves with their own reactions such as bursting into tears while watching a sentimental commercial or making an unintended hurtful remark to a friend. In these situations one might wonder, "Where in the world did *that* come from?" According to Corbin (1972), it came from part of our being called the "imaginal world." Hillman (2000) refers to this world as the soul, home to images and the power of the imagination.

Working with Images and Nurturing the Soul

The process of "meaning-making" in adulthood reflects a complex and dynamic interaction between the learners' unconscious inner selves and their conscious selves. Consciousness becomes populated with various emotionally-laden images evoked by the learner's context. They serve as vehicles for powerful energies arising from the unconscious and are connected in some way to the learners' conscious worlds and can manifest itself in images evoked by the text. They can potentially help learners connect the knowable world to the unknowable or the unconscious.

In "soul work," students learn to recognize, name and give voice to these images, and to integrate them more fully within the wholeness of their beings (Johnson, 1986). In educational contexts, this work always arises out of the learner's relationship with subject matter. It is best done in the privacy of personal journals. It is imperative that learners have complete control over these journals and decide the level of your interaction with their entries.

To apply this technique to your classroom, begin by helping your learners recognize and name some of the emotions and feelings that are associated with their learning experiences. For example, ask them to name an emotion or feeling they experienced during an assignment or classroom meeting such as excitement, anger, giddiness or fear. In their journals, suggest that they describe this emotion, what it might look like and what comes to mind when they recall this emotion. Once they start to write, encourage them to continue non-stop for approximately 10 min-

utes. As they reflect on the emotion or image, have them write whatever they associate with the image or emotion while encouraging them to stay focused. You might also suggest they draw or paint this experience and then write about it. While it may seem awkward at first, drawing can be a helpful way to make the images behind the emotion more visible.

Naming and elaborating the various images that come to populate conscious awareness during the learning experience encourages learners to be in conscious relationships with these energies and images which manifest in their learning experiences and everyday lives. Johnson (1986) and others describe additional steps that can be used to further deepen the process. But the approach described here is a good place to begin for those with little or no experience in this method.

Conclusion

The process of nurturing a soul in adult learning requires both a certain attitude toward life and commitment to practice. It is a deeply personal, spiritual and potentially powerful technique. However, before teachers use this method with their students, they should first learn more and work with it for a period of time in their own lives. Only when they begin to feel comfortable with their knowledge of the process should they attempt to incorporate this method into their teaching. It is also important that learners not feel as if they need to disclose anything or participate in the process if they are not interested.

Transformative learning does not necessarily require extraordinary events in our lives, nor does it always require that we think deeply and analytically about our beliefs and assumptions. Dramatic opportunities for transformative learning reside in imaginative engagement with the everydayness of our lives in what Thomas Moore (1996) refers to as the "re-enchantment of everyday life." Encounters with subject matter in adult learning settings provide a rich source of images and fantasies that enable learners to connect more fully and deeply with the text, the self and their outer worlds.

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