

Out of the Box Coaching Newsletter

On the Other Side of Illusion by Mary Bast

The Ouroboros, right, the snake swallowing its own tail, is a symbol of integration of the opposite, of re-creation.



“The therapeutic issue in psychotherapy is to ‘re-grow a basic sense of self, whereas the therapeutic issue in Buddhism is how to ‘see through’ the illusion or construct of the self. The two goals are not mutually exclusive. Rather, there is a wider perspective where they are compatible: Put very simply, you have to be somebody before you can be nobody.” John H. Engler, *Paths Beyond Ego*.

Reading Engler’s essay gave me an “aha” moment. I’d been wrestling with some differences in how clients express their experience of transformational change. Some describe becoming more sure of themselves, which can seem to be a strengthening of ego-image, yet they’re also clearly shifting to greater self-awareness. Others refer to a worldview that’s far more expansive, an awareness of self from the perspective of an objective witness that sees how programmed ego responses have operated. Realizing that both are necessary has helped me understand the symbolism of *coagulatio*:

Coagulatio is the process that turns something into earth. The churn of reality solidifies the personality, which becomes attached to an ego. In Jungian terms, *coagulatio* symbolizes the fulfillment of individuation, to be followed by other alchemical processes. “What has become fully concretized is now subject to transformation.”

Edward F. Edinger, *Anatomy of the Psyche*.

We have to become *somebody* before we can be *nobody*. Thus, my Eight client Bart, until his fifties, had been consolidating his self-image as a strong and fearless man. “I had a long history of seeking peak experiences, adrenaline rushes. I was always keen on river rafting and I wanted to do it in wild rivers like the Amazon, rapids you could gauge by the number of maimings they have per season.”

Bart had to *become* himself fully, to individuate, to operate in the world without apology, accepting himself as he was. Only then could he step out into a broader perspective, one where he saw through the illusion of needing to be strong and could begin the path to becoming *nobody*:

“Then I was hit by a truck and broke several ribs and an arm -- with some nerve damage. It was distressing from the point of view that I was now only as strong as a regular person. It forced me to ask for help in ways I never had before. I had always tended to be at sixes and sevens when it came to, on the one hand, having the most qualified person do it, and on the other hand, doing everything myself, approaching every act as a Warrior with absolutely everything he’s got. This became deeply frustrating because you can’t do everything. So, out of being partially incapacitated, I learned how tied I’d been to the need to be strong.”

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"I often think of the loss," continued Bart, "both to me and to all the people who knew me earlier in my life. I simply wasn't equipped to talk about larger issues; I'd been unable to *hear*. I was always back in the cave, conjecturing, ready to take a pot-shot, and I would never share. Now, when I'm really listening to someone, it's like walking down the sidewalk with our arms around each other, in step, making eye contact, walking *together*."

In *Anatomy of the Psyche*, Edward F. Edinger describes alchemical operations as "basic categories by which to understand the life of the psyche (and which) illustrate almost the full range of experiences that constitute individuation." He adds that many of the alchemical images overlap, and echoes the Jungian belief that there's no prescribed sequence.

It's been my experience, as well, that each person I coach has to undergo all aspects of what alchemists refer to as *The Great Work*, and not necessarily in the same progression as other clients. So the order of alchemical symbols presented over the past year in this newsletter is arbitrary. More important, no one client example is meant to convey greater or lesser aspects of significant change; only *different* aspects.

Coniunctio, in particular, could appear to represent a culmination of all the alchemical operations:

Coniunctio--Bringing together apparent opposites to make a larger whole; for example, uniting conscious and unconscious, balancing masculine and feminine principles, incorporating extroversion and introversion and, later, entering psychological wholeness.

It's important to understand, however, that this symbol includes two processes, first the bringing together of apparent opposites ("the lesser *coniunctio*"), and then later—after other processes such as *coagulatio*—the union of the opposites, which is greater than the sum of its parts. According to Edinger, "The greater *coniunctio* combines the opposites, mitigates and rectifies all one-sidedness."

So the balancing of masculine and feminine, for example, is not "a little of this, a little of that." Or, in the case of the Nine client quoted below, her efforts to become more assertive did not lead to wholeness as long as she was still polarized between anxiety and confidence. The "two kinds of change" she describes represent her experience of the "lesser" and the "greater" *coniunctio*:

"I've experienced two kinds of change in my life. The first kind, which really helps at the time, is not a major shift but rather becoming more effective at what I've always done. For example, when I was in graduate school I was so nervous presenting papers in class, I wished the earth would open up and swallow me. So I took assertiveness training and then taught assertiveness courses myself. I learned the *behaviors* that helped me act less nervous in front of a group. I think of that as incremental change, or in simple terms, a Band-Aid. I hadn't changed inside. I knew how to diminish anxiety when it arose, but I still felt a polarity between keeping quiet and girding myself up to speak in public."

"The second kind of change is much more significant, a bolt of lightning where I suddenly *get* something about myself, a shift from being asleep to awakening. Relative to assertiveness, I saw that behind the anxiety was a child who believed nobody would ever be interested in what she had to say. I allowed myself to experience that child and her story fully, then something fundamental shifted inside. The story no longer matters. There is no polarity. I am both quiet and outspoken, both soft and strong."