Alchemy and the Teacher

By Clifford Mayes

Why Alchemy?

In order for teachers to reflect deeply upon themselves, they need powerful models and images to guide their introspection. In teacher reflectivity, as in the therapeutic processes, psychic energy must ultimately be "contained" by models and modalities that enable one to make sense out of one's inner and outer experiences. This enables those experiences to form the basis for the transformation of self, setting, and other. In this article, I would like to introduce and employ a model that I believe can enrich teacher reflectivity at biographical, political and spiritual levels. I am speaking of alchemy—and specifically, Jung's psychotherapeutic interpretation of it.

An Alchemical Primer

In the last major phase of his career, Carl Jung, the father of archetypal psychology, turned to the lost art and arcane texts of alchemy in his researches, claiming that alchemical processes subtly embodied and richly symbolized the psycho-spiritual transformations that occur in the course of deep therapy. He asserted that "the world of alchemical symbols definitely does not belong to the rubbish heap of the past, but stands in a very real and living relationship to our

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most recent discoveries concerning the psychology of the unconscious" (1963, p. xiii). In this article, I want to show how alchemy in its psychotherapeutic contexts offers especially rich symbols for exploring oneself as a teacher.

A Few Historical Notes on Alchemy

The son of a Protestant minister, Jung asserted that the sacramentally minimalist world of Protestantism had stripped Christianity of its sacred archetypal flesh by tearing away many of its rites and symbols. Contrary to the popular contemporary image of the alchemist as a quick-change artist trying to coax a *sub rosa* fortune in gold out of coal shards, the religious alchemists were engaged in a labor of high spiritual import. The gold that they aimed to produce—the Philosopher's Stone—represented nothing less than the spiritualization of matter, just as the wine of the mass became the true blood of Christ. Thus, the religious alchemist insisted that the transformations of matter that he sought in both himself and his material were *tam moralis quam physica*—moral as well as physical. Little wonder, then, that the religious alchemist believed that he could bring his work to completion only if he achieved a *unio mystica*—a mystical union—with God, which could happen only if he purified his own psyche and spirit. Contained in each alchemical text, in other words, are archetypal projections of the individual alchemist engaged in a proto-chemical drama of psycho-spiritual integration. Psychologically interpreted, alchemy is "a treasury of analogies that corporify or embody the objective psyche and the process it undergoes in development" (Edinger, 1985, p. 100).

Basic Alchemical Procedures

Each alchemist practiced and wrote about his craft in unique terms, but this does not mean that there are no generalizations that we can make about the art of alchemy (Edinger, 1985). The alchemical project would almost always involve the differentiation of the *prima materia* (or the base starting material) into one of the four elements: earth, air, water, or fire. The *prima materia* was typically some very disprized material: refuse, shards and stones, fecal matter, menstrual blood, even scabrous remnants. Looked at therapeutically, this rather shockingly symbolizes the beginning of a deep psychotherapy. We must begin with our primal wounds, sins, shames, dreads, and indeed all those shabby parts of ourselves that we desperately attempt throughout our lives to hide in the nooks and crannies of our psyches. Jung called this part of our psyches "the shadow" and insisted that we must therapeutically confront and work with it, for what we do not courageously acknowledge, productively transform, and then skillfully integrate, will, in one way or another, undermine us.

For the alchemist, each of the four elements answered to a particular alchemical process. Fire was at the heart of the alchemical operation called *calcinatio*—heating a substance. *Solutio,* corresponding to water, referred to any dissolving operation.

Coagulatio, an earthy process, was coagulation—such as mud becoming a brick or an egg hardening on a frying pan. And finally, corresponding to air was *sublimatio*. For the alchemists and Jung, *sublimatio,* derived from *sublimis* or *high*, refers to changing a tangible material into any sort of gas, which, of course, tends to rise. Each element and its corresponding process have both a light, salutary side and a shadowy, problematic one.

The Alchemical Life of the Teacher

I had a series of four conversations, each lasting about 45 minutes, in January and February of 2002 with a 59-year-old secondary-school teacher of 30 years, whom I shall call Christy Ann. She had taught both regular and special education classes in public and private schools. A devout member of her church (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or "Mormon"), she is also a person of passionate political convictions that stem back to her days as a political activist in the 1960s. Divorced at an early age, she had single-handedly raised her daughter, Danielle. Christy Ann has been married for 10 years to her second husband, who also teaches. Before our interviews, I asked her to read the information on alchemy contained in this article, which then formed the foundation of our mutual reflections on her life as a teacher. Our conversations came to a total of about three hours and yielded almost 40 pages of transcribed material.

Calcinatio (Fire)

Although any alchemical operation could serve as the starting point of the *opus, calcinatio* was probably the most common. "The chemical process of *calcinatio* entails the intense heating of a solid in order to drive off water and all other constituents that will volatilize" (Edinger, 1985, p. 17). Water, naturally associated with the depths of the primordial ocean as well as the uroboric fluids of the womb, is a common archetypal symbol of both the unconscious and innocence. Because fire evaporates moisture, it therefore symbolizes those experiences that dispel innocence. Jung explained: "When a man is subjected to a great emotion, it means that he is subjected to the fire, and the contact with the fire can give him the nature of a subtle body; the fire can subtilize him or it can destroy him" (Jung, 1995, p. 144).

Christy Ann and the Calcinatio

There has been a good deal of discussion over the last several decades about the trials and traumas of the first-year teacher—and how those initiatory blazes may either temper and mold her or cause her to "burn out." The first year or so of teaching can result in either a "subtilizing" *calcinatio* of the novice teacher into a more psychologically and pedagogically mature form, or it can be a professional holocaust that psychologically chars the teacher and turns her optimism into cinders (Bullough, 1989). Christy Ann immediately identified with the imagery of initia-

tory blazes because as she put it, "I'm a fiery Irish woman!" Christy Ann was in a teacher preparation program in the early 1960's at an Arizona university. As with so many other prospective teachers of that time (and with still far too many today), Christy Ann's "training" consisted almost entirely of learning principles of behaviorism and applying them to writing up lesson plans. The idea that the first years of teaching could be likened to a *calcinatio* blaze initially caused her to muse about how poorly her teacher-education program had prepared her for those novitiate flames.

Christy Ann: Having the idea of the initiatory blazes causing someone to either temper and mold or to burn out—welI, I was certainly unprepared by my teacher training to know what in the world I was getting into. When I went to do my student teaching I came to a classroom in which the teacher hardly let me do anything at all. I was 19, some of the students were 18, so he didn't want to leave me with the class. I didn't do anything but grade papers, basically. So I just had nothing—no preparation, and then I was hired at a junior high school where the discipline was to take children out into the hall and hit them with a paddle if they were out of line. This was in 1964. I didn't know how to calm the kids down or anything, but I wouldn't do it. The principal was just horrified that I would buck the system.

Cliff: So one thing I hear you saying is that these fires were maybe especially intense because you weren't sufficiently prepared for them? That they would have been less intense had your teacher preparation been better?

Christy Ann: Absolutely. If someone said to me in my teacher education program, "You're going to have to take children out and hit them with a board," it might have given me pause about whether or not I even wanted to be a teacher…. The other part was that no one ever taught me how to put units together. I know that teacher education isn't that way anymore. It's much more enlightened. But back then, I had no clear goals. So, when I got finished with that year, I thought, "You know, I did a pretty good job considering I just made up much of it." I guess that, having gone through those fires, I ultimately came out the other side thinking, "I want to be a teacher, and I'm going to have to be the Lone Ranger in terms of getting help from other people, but I want to go on with this." Anyway, because I refused to paddle students and was vocal about it, that year they did change the policy and they got rid of the boards.

Cliff: You responded with some fire of your own.

Christy Ann: Yes, that's exactly what I did. I'm a fiery Irish woman! But then there was a new problem: The students figured out that I wasn't going to hit anybody, which made the classroom even more raucous. Finally, I just sat down with them early in the morning when they were still half-asleep and said, "You know, you have to go to school and I have to teach. I have some really fun and interesting things I want to do with you guys, but I can't do anything the way things are now. So let's work out a

system together of what we can agree upon. So we set up classroom rules which we put on the board. There were certain consequences, the final one of which was I was going to call the person's parents, which nobody in the school did. I ended up calling more than one of the children's parents and had them come in and had the child sit with me and just say what was going on in front of their parents so that we all became part of the solution. So I got past all the discipline issues, but I thought that if I didn't make it past that that I would quit. I was just miserable.

Cliff: Would it be fair to say that the fires that you were passing through helped you to hammer out your own system of classroom management that was emotionally productive and fair?

Christy Ann: That's true! And not only that but it kind of became a model because I talked about this a lot with other teachers in the school who were faced with some of the same issues. I know I affected the fact that there was no more hitting of children after that school year and that several teachers did take on my approach. So I guess you could say that these fires helped me forge some tools that other teachers could use too.

Even in light of how painful the initiatory flames were, Christy Ann strongly disagreed with what she felt was an excessive emphasis that I had placed on teacher burn-out.

Christy Ann: You wrote about the teacher's optimism turning to cinders. Well, I don't agree! My optimism didn't turn to cinders. I felt that I had come upon something that really was a calling for me and I was mean and ornery (or Irish!) enough to take on an administration—an old man who just sat in his office and just didn't want anyone to bother him, basically—to force him to change some things there. I found that I had to be combative and I took pleasure in the fact that I had taken him on and that there were changes as a result of it.

Cliff: The fires of your teaching experience spread to the new territory of political commitment—and you found that you liked it!

Christy Ann: Uh huh. I think that I often saw the administration as adversarial. I was surprised at that—I thought that they were going to be the good guys who would understand and give me support and take care of the bad kids for me. None of that happened. So the fire of that awareness started me to believing that I would have to fight for anything I hoped to get from the administration. That was a bit of an extreme position, but then I wasn't continually disappointed when I didn't get support.

It emerged in our talks that Christy Ann had become increasingly radicalized politically throughout the 1960's, eventually winding up at Berkeley in the anti-war movement and after that at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, where she studied

massage and psychotherapy. As she reflected more and more deeply on how the *calcinatio* of her first year of teaching had shaped her professionally, she also began to explore how it had been the furnace in which her evolving political ideology was being hammered out in ways that she was only partially aware of at the time. This was particularly true, she said, when it came to challenging male authority—something that a woman born in 1942 had not been culturally primed to do.

Christy Ann: I'm sure that the principal, who probably had just a year or so left to retire, just did not know what to do with this uppity first-year teacher, because in those days before the social revolution women were expected to be obedient; seen and not heard. I did get involved politically, and years later during Vietnam—which I thought was a huge social injustice—I took that sense of righteous indignation that I'd felt (and expressed!) against the principal to a higher level.

Cliff: So, what happened to you in your confrontations with the school administrator—they were a step on the road of your radicalization?

Christy Ann: Yep. Because I was successful at that level and forced the principal to make some changes I think I felt emboldened to take it up to the next level.

The evocative imagery of fire also stimulated Christy Ann to speculate on some of the psychodynamic roots of her need to challenge unreasonable authority figures.

Christy Ann: We were just discussing the political part of resisting the abusing of children by hitting them with a paddle. It was so important to me because I came from a family where my father, after returning from WWII when I was about four years old, became an erratic, abusive man who sometimes hit me with a belt or his hands. He was explosively abusive verbally, too, and so by the time that I was a teenager, I just wouldn't put up with it, and I just stood toe-to-toe with him and if he started shouting and cursing at me, I didn't curse at him but I shouted back at him! I grew tall very quickly—I was about 5'5" in the 6th grade—so by that time he stopped hurting me. I left home when I was 17 to go to college and was 21 when I started teaching, and now here was another *older man ordering me to be physically abusive to the kids, which was horrifying to me. I had worked my way out of a situation in a family and then was being told to come back into it again. I was horrified that anyone would think of treating children that way.*

Cliff: Part of the flames that you were being forced to confront in your school situation were, in a sense, extensions of flames you had to face as a child, then?

Christy Ann: Yeah, exactly! It's like the fire had spread—like I was even being asked to make it spread! So [in confronting the principal] I just went into the automatic mode which I had used in dealing with my father, which was just to confront him.

Solutio (Water)

Of *solutio,* the dissolving process that corresponds to the element of water, Edinger says, "for the alchemist, *solutio* often meant the return of the differentiated matter to its primal undifferentiated state—that is, to *prima materia*. Water was thought of as the womb and *solutio* as a return to the womb for rebirth" (p. 43). According to Jung, "Water in all its forms—sea, lake, river, spring—is one of the commonest typifications of the unconscious, as it is also the lunar femininity that is closely associated with water" (Jung, 1995, p. 272).

Water often symbolizes a vitally important therapeutic dynamic called *transference*. It was Freud who first noted *transference* in psychotherapy as "the experiencing of feelings, drives, attitudes, fantasies, and defenses toward a person in the present which are inappropriate to that person and are a repetition, a displacement of reactions originating in regard to significant persons of early childhood" (Greenson, 1990, p.151). Contrary to the Freudian view, Jung asserted that although the sexual component of the transference was "undeniable, it is not always the only one and not always the essential one" (Jung, 1965, p. 9). The patient may also project onto the analyst a wide variety of non-sexual, archetypal energies from the collective unconscious (Kirsch, 1995). Yet, whether it is a matter of subconscious psychosexual projections or archetypal supra-sexual ones, the patient's consciousness symbolically and symbiotically "flows" into the analyst, who must now "contain" it. If the analyst is able to healthily "contain" the patient's watery projections—that is, if the analyst can interpret them as information that he or she can use in furtherance of the patient's growth—then the transference becomes an invaluable therapeutic tool. Sometimes, however, the analyst cannot contain that torrential energy but is flooded by it. Falling under the seductive sway of the projections, the analyst comes to inappropriately see himself or herself as the all-wise archetypal Great Father or the all-nurturing archetypal Great Mother.

As August Aichhorn, a Freudian psychiatrist specializing in work with adolescents, observed, people in authority roles such as coaches, ministers, bosses, policemen, or superior military officers are constantly objects of projection. But according to Aichhorn it is teachers who, second only to analysts, are most often the focal point of positive and negative parental projections. And just as the teacher may be the focus of personal parental projections, he or she may also be the focus of archetypal parental projections (Mayes, 1999; Mayes, 2002). One of the most common archetypal transferences in the classroom is the *solutio,* or "dissolving" of the student into the archetypal womb of the teacher, who thus takes on—and sometimes inappropriately acts out—the primordial role of The Great Mother. This archetypal regression to the waters of the primordial womb is called *uroboric incest,* "a desire to be dissolved and absorbed; passively one lets oneself be taken in….The Great Mother takes the little child back into herself" (Neumann, in Edinger, 1985, 49).

Many people become teachers because of a desire to nurture students. Noddings (1995) has even argued that caring is at the heart of the call to teach, claiming (correctly, I believe) that caring tends to come more naturally to females than to males, which helps explain the predominance of women in teaching (Gilligan, 1982; Belenkey, et al., 1986; Chodorow, 1978). However, nurturance can go too far; and when it does, it depletes. Wolstein has called the therapist who nurtures beyond healthy limits "the overprotective therapist" (Wolstein, 1988, p. 225). There are also overprotective teachers" (Mayes, 2002). If care overflows healthy limits, not only the teacher but also the student can emotionally drown in the personal and archetypal waters of a failed *solutio*.

Christy Ann and the Solutio

Christy Ann: What kept coming into my mind while reading the water section on transference was the year after I taught at the junior high school—you know, my first year teaching. During the second year, I took a job as a home teacher. I went to the homes of students who could not come to school. In those days they did not let pregnant girls come anywhere near the campus, so most of the people I went to were pregnant girls. I found myself having a personal relationship with these students because I saw them twice a week and I felt bad for them—well, you know, they were mostly pregnant, unmarried girls in the early 1960's, so you can imagine, right? I had a couple of girls who were in a terrible psychological state. And that aroused in me –well, I guess you could call it a counter-transference—a desire to help them beyond just bringing them English lessons or the like. I didn't know what I wanted to do about that, but I knew that it was very meaningful for me to have one-on-one encounters with students. Because I was just a few years older, they seemed like younger sisters to me and it was hard sometimes to stay on the subject matter. [After these experiences, Christy Ann returned to the classroom.] My teaching began to take an entirely different direction, which was away from public schools. I found that whenever I was in a classroom that I couldn't go home without worrying about the one or two kids in my classes who I knew were in pain. It would almost stop the flow of what I was doing in a classroom if they didn't come to school that day. At one school I taught at I had 150 kids a day; you can ask what happened to Johnny or ask friends, but it's just a huge blur of processing people….

Cliff: In the article, I deal with two different kinds of transference: productive and unproductive ones. Sounds to me like what you're saying here is that this transference, with you in an older-sister or mother role, started out to be productive but was now getting to the point where it was consuming you—becoming unproductive.

Christy Ann: To some degree, yes. The other part of it, of course, is that students transfer the bad mother onto me and I saw myself in the role of the good sister. I [wanted to be] the cheerleader or the good guy—you know, "When you came to my class you have fun!" But there were those students who constantly stopped the

process because anything I said was taken as negative and disruptive. We would have to stop the class (and it was usually boys) and because I had high school kids I learned to be sarcastic, which is terrible, but I found that it was effective. . . .

Cliff: In terms of your teaching style, then, this solutio process also contributed to your style of teaching by forcing you to deal with a negative transference onto you?

Christy Ann: Absolutely! Because, see, I was forced into being a parent [to these students] when I still was thinking that I was fairly young (late 20's). I was confronted with 14- and 15-year olds who almost could have been my children. I realized that I didn't share the same music or the same fashion anymore and that they were pushing me into a parental authoritative role. I had to struggle with how I would parent teenagers, even though I was young, I think that you can only be the good guy/girl for a time, because it doesn't work after a while because you are then growing and changing and they don't see you anymore as an older sibling, they see you as a parent.

Christy Ann reported that her most painful experience of receiving negative parental projections from students happened during her time as a special education teacher. As she did so, I was reminded of what Aichhorn had written over 60 years ago and which still seemed relevant: "[With a neurotic child] with symptoms of delinquency…, the tendency to transfer his [negative] attitude toward his parents to the person in authority is immediately noticeable" (1990, p. 97).

Christy Ann: After years of teaching in typical public school classrooms—you know, with 30 or 40 students a class back then, I realized that I really missed working with kids one-on-one, so I went back to school and got a special ed teaching certificate working with emotionally disturbed kids. I felt that I would have small classes. This was in the 1980's, when special ed was still kind of a new thing. I did have smaller classes alright! But I found that the students were angry and so disenfranchised from the system that almost nothing I did had an impact on them or on our learning relationship. The classroom was really just a holding cell. I did do some innovative things, but they had projected so much onto me—from the system, from their parents, from whatever!—that I was just "the teacher," and that was the hated object, so I had almost no wiggle room to change their perceptions…. In the terms you use in the article, they projected "the enemy" onto me, and I just couldn't get out from under that projection.

In stark contrast to this negative *solutio* and Christy Ann's resulting emotional engulfment, she reported a quite different teaching experience several years later when she had returned to teaching again.

Christy Ann: Five years later, I moved to Hawaii. I went back to teaching with great trepidation. I found a job teaching at a boy's school in Hawaii. I taught lower SES (socio-economic strata) kids, and what I found was that I could go back to

playing a role for them that they had projected onto me. I was a "haole"—a white woman—in an all boy's school with mostly male teachers, and fortunately I was not seen as the bad mother-type but rather as a good mother. I was able to use this projection very effectively to give them some social capital that they would not have had otherwise. This was a group of boys that liked me. They opened up their hearts to me and as a result I was able to just move into that space. What I did there that I found so satisfying was that I could bring them information that they could use to better themselves. Mine was a very inviting classroom because the school was run by strict Catholic monks and I provided opportunities for them to speak and perform an display their poetry, etc. There was such severe discipline set up in the school that I could be the one who "freed" them when they came to my classroom.

Cliff: So you were not only the nurturing mother, you were the liberating mother, too?

Christy Ann: Yes, and a bit of a Peter Pan type. You know, "Let's-go-to-Neverland-for-the-hour-that-you-are-in-my-class" type of thing. I taught literature and creative writing, and because of the Polynesian cultural tendency to want to take flights of fancy and "talk story," they were very grateful to me for the opportunity to really get into the literature. They would draw it and write poems about it. It was the most re-invigorating thing for me as a teacher! I mean, to come into a setting with people who were somewhat naive and highly appreciative of what I did for them.

Cliff: To me, this sounds like a great example of a healthy counter-transference. You're using information you're getting from them through their transference to find out who they are, what they need; you're containing it in such a way that you're meeting some of your needs, too, and are not being overwhelmed by it, not drowning in any illusions—you know, becoming so much of a mother to them that you try to displace their own mother, or begin to drown in your emotions for them so much that you couldn't take care of Danielle [her teenage daughter]. So you're getting your *needs met, but you're also then using what they are projecting onto you as information about* their *needs. This shows you ways to help them grow. It seems like the model of good transference-countertransference.*

Christy Ann: Thanks! Yeah, I think it was! A lot of these boys were affected by me because I took them to places that they couldn't go—I arranged for them to be on television, their works were published and we won a national award for our little poetry magazine—I could do things as a white woman who had power and social status for them. And I did play out that role of being the savior, the great mother for them. But it was just with pleasure; it never took on a negative aspect. I had my own teenage daughter at the time, and it wasn't always a bed of roses with her, but I could look forward to going to school and meeting a chorus of people who were actually happy to see me! I think that's the power of the positive projection: you find a role

that you're playing in this play with your students. I got great pleasure playing the role of the one who releases them from their captivity. Of course, it all fit into my 60's stuff as well—you know, at Berkeley. "Power to the People!" We were playing out roles—they were doing it unconsciously, I was doing it consciously.

For me, another maternal part of all this was that it was also an obvious birth process for them, and that's where I could take great pleasure. I mean, boys who had a 200-word vocabulary (I'm not exaggerating) found their voice through poetry or a poet (for example, Dylan Thomas). They understood the poems, and when they would get up to present them to the class (and remember, they had fathers who had given up and were fishermen and just sat around and stared and drank) it had great meaning for them; I gave them somebody's words through which they could express their own feelings. My honors class wrote 50-page novellas, which we published and they were able to take home and proudly put on nearly empty bookshelves.

Cliff: So there was definitely an element of political empowerment as well.

Christy Ann: Oh, totally. These boys, for the most part, came from West Oahu, where they would certainly be considered in the lower one-third of the social caste system, and most of them never gave any thought to going off-island, going to school anyplace else; they didn't think that they could get into colleges. I went through the process with a number of my boys of getting them into Catholic boy's schools on the mainland, which opened up their lives tremendously. So there was a social and political activist role there—wanting to make a difference in people's lives beyond teaching them the curriculum.

Cliff: So because of how they empowered you *through what they transferred onto you, you were then able to empower* them *by letting them know that a powerful person like you thought these things were possible for them—and then made it happen for them.*

Christy Ann: Yes, that's probably a pretty good way of putting it. And talk about going from negative to positive projection—going from the utter blackness of some public schools on the mainland—to a completely different type of place like Hawaii!. I almost had to go out of white culture to be able to find the students I was looking for. I went back a year later to teach on the mainland in an affluent school, and none of them wanted what I had to offer. . . .

Cliff: So there is a cultural aspect to this transference as well. Because you were in such a "heartful" culture where women play such a dominant nurturing role, this transference could happen in a way that wouldn't be nearly so likely back here, especially with middle-class white kids.

Christy Ann: Boy, you've said it! That's exactly correct.

Sublimatio (Air)

The sublimation process corresponds to air, *sublimis* meaning "sublime," and refers to the process of transforming something low into something high. Although exhilirating, the potential danger in *sublimatio* experiences is that they may cause one to lose touch with concrete reality. The *sublimatio* should be in a healthy dialectical relationship with the grounded *coagulatio*. The ability to alternate between the concrete and the spiritual is the alchemical process of the *circulatio*. I chose to examine the *circulatio* by questioning Christy Ann about possible ways in which her daily life as a teacher may have affected her spiritual development over the years, and about how that spiritual growth may in turn have influenced her pedagogical practice.

Christy Ann: In the article, you talk about the circulatio—the possible ways in which the teacher's daily life may have affected her spiritual development through the years, or how that spiritual growth may have influenced her pedagogical practice. Well, I was teaching in a Catholic school, so even though I'm a Mormon, this gave me the freedom to openly teach my love of Jesus Christ and my basic beliefs about the gospel.

Cliff: So here, in this school on both the geographical and social margins of conventional American society, you find yourself positioned to be more open about your basic religious commitments?

Christy Ann: Yeah. It was like a breath of fresh air!

Cliff: That's an interesting image to use, you know, because this sublimatio process of spiritualizing your practice can be likened to the element of air. In Greek and Hebrew, for instance, the word for "breath" and "spirit" are the same. Could you give me an example of how this sublimatio, this turning the curriculum into spiritual air, happened with the Oahu boys?

Christy Ann: Sure. I had to teach British literature to these boys who were poor and had never been off the island of Hawaii; in fact, no one in the class could find England on a map of the world. So the challenge was to make all this stuff relevant and interesting, while at the same time I was always looking for ways of infusing my own spirituality into the curriculum. So when we got to Chaucer and the Middle Ages, I decided that I would throw in the Grail Legend, which really was about the knight's quest to come to the presence of Jesus Christ, and getting into the Grail Castle, where Christ himself serves them the sacrament from the Holy Chalice—or Grail. *Nobody ever tells that story. I showed them* Monty Python *when it was over.*

Cliff: You mean, Monty Python and the Search for the Holy Grail *? But that's kind of a parody of the whole thing, isn't it?*

Christy Ann: I wouldn't call it a parody. That's negative! It was just funny! We had a fabulous time with it—you know, a sort of comic relief after everything serious we'd learned about the Holy Grail Legend. Another thing I did was—we had discussions about their own beliefs and how they are knights too, and what their grail quest was, all from a mythical point of view: who they were, who they wanted to be, how they planned to accomplish it. Monty Python and the Holy Grail *had the positive effect of showing these kids that spirituality didn't have to be grim—that it has a light, easy side too! All of this comes to my mind when I think about genuinely putting an obvious spiritual spin on the curriculum.*

Cliff: Can you think of some other examples—in other teaching settings?

Christy Ann: Some years later I taught at a community college, and I would always include a section on psycho-spirituality and inform them about meditation and higher states of consciousness. I wanted them to absolutely encounter a spiritually devoted person who really sought to bring my spiritual beliefs into concrete interaction. I tried to present them with a possible model of psychological and spiritual evolution beyond, probably, what they had thought about before.

Cliff: Have you taught in the public schools at a time in your life when you have been passionately devoted to your present religious beliefs?

Christy Ann: Sure. Lots.

Cliff: I ask this because, in the other teaching settings you've mentioned—a Catholic school, a community college—it's easier to be explicit about your own spiritual commitments than in the public schools. In the terms we're using here, the public schools are not a very friendly environment for the sublimatio process. So, let's say you were teaching in, for instance, 10th-grade in a public high school in Stockton? Would you try to engage in a sublimatio process in that kind of setting? Would you try to spiritualize your teaching there?

Christy Ann: I probably would do the same thing; probably not to the same degree, because I don't think that the kids could follow it, but I think that if it came up, I would include the transpersonal element and lay down models of people who I think are "saints." I would obviously not go into the "Thirteen Articles of Faith [of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints]"! But I think that as long as we're having a discussion in which I'm having them talk about how they see things at very deep levels and what they believe, that I can do the same thing without feeling that I am crossing any sort of legal lines. Anyway, I've got to say that this "sublimation" is my favorite alchemical idea—it really catches me! That I can take this base matter—unformed adolescent minds—and begin acting like the sorcerer and begin the process of weaving their hearts, minds, and souls and get them to be excited about something that is at least a culturally high idea; to be able to talk about Dante or Goethe and see that that is exciting—that it also has some social

capital to it. That's the excitement of being a teacher—taking something that is just clay, base material, and squeezing and squeezing it until you bring the students up and make them subtler or more refined. You hope that even for just one hour out of a year that you can hold them up so high so that they have been there once and remember it. That is my most favorite thing that I do! Maybe it's because I'm a product of the 60's, when getting high was the dogma—to get of the ordinary and into the transcendent. So getting them high got me high as well, which was the fun of it. Pure energy!

Cliff: As you know from the article, the second part of the sublimatio picture has to do not so much with how you are affecting your students' spiritual growth, but how they are affecting yours. This spiritual give-and-take is the circulatio, the circulating *back and forth of spiritual influences.*

Christy Ann: Right. And as I read the alchemy stuff you gave me, the circulatio image made a lot of sense to me, because it's rarely, if ever, the case, that you just have this one-sided effect on someone without being changed by them too. And boy is this ever true in the classroom! You know, people talk about the "aloha spirit" in Hawaii and it sounds like it's a canned thing that you get in downtown Waikiki. But it really is an incredibly beautiful Polynesian approach to life. Encountering all these kids everyday whose first way of relating is a heartfelt, intuitive excitement about things—this allowed me to open up that part of myself, so that I found that when I left school that at the end of the day I was still feeling very open and could relate on a heartfelt level that allowed me to trust my intuitive self a lot more. Actually, when I was in Hawaii I had a number of quite unique spiritual experiences that really changed me big-time, and I think they were the direct result of spending 60 hours a week with students whose culture valued ways of being that grew out of feeling and intuition. Teaching them sort of forced me to relate to them in those ways because that was their best way of learning. And as a woman, my ways of "being spiritual" probably relate more naturally to feeling and intuition— particularly intuition. But in orthodox religion, there is a tendency to focus more on discussion, doctrine, church meetings. I'd done all those things, and they had been satisfying. But I'd never really been able to let my spirituality rip like I could in Hawaii, and that changed me and my spirituality—and my teaching!— forever.

Mortificatio (Earth)

The alchemists associated the *mortificatio* (or "mortification") with chthonic matter and destructive chemical processes. Jung saw the *mortificatio* as a projection of the alchemist's own shadow, and this had therapeutic implications:

> Psychologically, we can say that [the *mortificatio*] has thrown off the conventional husk and developed into a stark encounter with reality, with no false veils or adornments of any kind. Man stands forth as he really is and shows what was

> hidden under the mask of conventional adaptation: the shadow. This is now raised to consciousness and integrated with the ego, which means a move in the direction of wholeness. Wholeness is not so much perfection as completeness. (Jung, 1992, p. 77).

Matter must decompose into the *prima materia* before it can ultimately be spiritually reconstituted as the Philosopher's Stone. To the Christian alchemists, Paul seemed to be referring to the *mortificatio* when he wrote of the glorified, eternal body that "it is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption.... It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15: 42-44). Salvation grows out of the compost of our fallen natures. This is also the paradox of "individuation," which emerges out of therapeutic confrontation with our darkest secrets and complexes.

Cliff: Can you think of some times (that you'd be willing to talk about!) when some of your own issues, or wounds, or shadows have helped you to become a better teacher?

Christy Ann: Well, I have a couple of things that I can think of right off the bat. The first has to do with the urge I had for flight. I grew up in a small town outside of Denver with a mother who was definitely a small-town girl. I had gone to Canada when I was 15; when I was 17 I went to Cuba, and there was always this urge that I had to get out of wherever I was. I think part of it had to do with being young and wanting adventure and believing that any job was a constriction. I was partly drawn to teaching because I would only have to work 185 days a year and that left me some freedom to travel and go and do.

Cliff: I don't really see how traveling and freedom are a problem. . . .

Christy Ann: Well, see, I think that I was really running away from the shadow parts of myself, and the problem *was that I didn't stay anywhere for more than a couple of years. With teaching, you can pretty much go wherever you want to go and people will hire you if you're halfway decent. The problem was that I never took the time to really refine my curriculum, never really got to know the staff that I worked with, never had as large an impact on school policies or curriculum as I could have had if I'd stayed. I think I was running away from getting old, running away from being my mother (who I saw as small and limited), from being lonely, and I think that I did myself and my students a disservice by not staying. But see, that would have meant owning up to this shadow, and that's what I was completely unwilling to do then. . . . I think the other thing the shadow image reminds me of has to do with my idealism, my perfectionism.*

Cliff: Perfectionism as a wound? I've never thought of it that way. Perfection seems exactly the opposite of a wound.

Christy Ann: Yeah, but nothing ever is perfect! But that's what I had to have! I wanted the perfect administrator. Look, I was still a very young woman then, so

I guess what I was really wanting was the perfect father. This was a shadow. This was a wound.

I thought as Christy Ann said this of Madeline Grumet's (1981) assertion that there is sometimes an Oedipal/Electra dynamic at play in school sites. The male administrator looks to the accessible and supportive female teacher to get maternal nurturing, while the female teacher sees the male administrator as a father figure whose approval and love she seeks.

Christy Ann: But, of course, I never found an administration that I thought I could work with. After a while of being bothered by the principal or the rules or the unfairness of the situation, I think that rebellious adolescent part of me kicked in (jumping out of the shadows, right?), making me take on or otherwise just plain be unhappy with the adults or the authority figures. I think what I did in my classroom appealed to teens because I complained about those in authority, and adolescents love to have somebody who wants to complain with them about what's going on. So, see, I think that my shadow parts not only had negative effects but also resulted in me, after all, doing a pretty darn good job of setting up a classroom environment that was, well, first of all, exciting—because I half-knew that I wasn't going to be there for more than a couple of years, so I could give it my all and not burn out.

Cliff: Because you knew that fleeing your shadow would limit your time at any particular school, you could actually commit more *in the short time you'd be there? And because of your "shadow rebel," your kids could identify with* you *more.*

Christy Ann: I guess so, huh? And I think that I did good being an ally with my students, empowering them (There's that word again! I do use it a lot, don't I?) to question authority and insist on making things fair. So, I guess—you know, looking at it in these terms—I did good as a result of being the wounded teacher. I did good <u>*in spite of*</u> *myself.*

Then, almost as if to confirm my silent musings about Grumet's Freudian interpretation of certain teacher/administrator relationships, Christy Ann, after a long pause in which I knew she wanted to say something but was trying to find just the right words, let out a long sigh:

Christy Ann: One more thing about the wound—I just want to say again that I had a very poor relationship with my father—or I guess my father had a very poor relationship with me. I really wanted one who showed that he cared about me, talked to me, came to see me in plays, stuff like that, you know—and stuff that lots more fathers do today than when I was a teenager in the 1950's! But my father's attitude was (and it was typical at the time): "Children are raised by the mother, and I do the work, and when I come home they're supposed to be quiet, and when I need a break from the rat-race, I go fishing." I know that that part of me, particularly that adolescent girl, is still harmed, still in the shadows. In fact, she still is *a shadow. It's*

the part of me that wants a father's attention, someone to take me into the world and explain how it works, show me how cars work, you know, and just do a number of things so that I could survive in the world. Maybe that's part of the reason that I had no patience with male principals—and back then almost all of them were men! And I can see now, after talking about all this, that that "Shadow-Me" also identified with some of the kids who came into the classroom who obviously were having a poor time with their parents. I think I was more aware of those troubled kids and more nurturing to them, and that I looked for more ways to educate those kids perhaps than kids who I saw as functioning adolescents.

Conclusion

The archetypal image of the *calcinatio* proved a highly generative metaphor for Christy Ann in reflecting on some of the most important dilemmas that she had had to confront as a novice teacher, and how little and poorly she had been prepared for those experiences in her teacher education program. Furthermore, exploring the *calcinatio* metaphor caused her to speculate on some of the psychodynamic origins of her political commitments. Fire imagery also helped both of us come to see that, taken together, the familial dynamics that had first sparked her resistance to authority, her early growth as a teacher, and her ultimate emergence as a political person, were a growing flame which had, over almost forty years, taken the *prima material* of that first-year teacher and turned her into the Philosopher's Stone of a tempered, wizened teacher. The watery images and motifs of the *solutio* also flowed quickly and naturally for Christy Ann into a wide range of recollections of how maternal transferences and counter-transferences had both served and hampered her in her teaching—depending upon the site, the cultural context, and her personal and professional stage of development. Christy Ann was most gripped by the images of the *sublimatio* and *cirulatio*, for they seemed to allow her a very immediate and intimate access to the wellsprings of her calling—namely, to provide her students with cultural capital and political insights, that would "lift" them into more higher academic, political, and even spiritual spheres. Finally, using the metaphor of the *morificatio,* Christy Ann probed some of her psychic wounds—and to see how, as Jung insisted, one's shadow, if carefully questioned and respectfully handled, could paradoxically be a source of appropriately used power.

Near the end of our last interview, Christy Ann said: *"These discussions have helped me catch a vision of how complex my reasons for teaching are—and also how those factors (personal, political, spiritual, the whole deal!) have molded my teaching in so many different ways. They've also helped me see how certain stages and issues throughout my life tie into things I was going through as a teacher. But most of all, I guess, this whole process has helped me see a bigger pattern in my teaching—one that relates to some really interesting images and practices that are hundreds—maybe even thousands—of years old. Teachers have to feel that kind of significance in what they're doing, that they're making a difference, that they're on*

a mission that matters— 'cause, Heaven knows, that's not the message we get from society most of the time!

Because it operates at such profound psychodynamic levels, alchemy offers a highly potent set of spiritual technologies for profound teacher reflectivity. Such imagistically based reflectivity is bound to touch us, our students, and our practice in galvanizing and durable ways, for as Jung declared, "concepts are coined and negotiable values; images are life" (pg. 180). As I have tried to show in this in-depth study of one teacher, the images of alchemy may help teachers understand themselves, their sense of calling, and their ways of teaching with greater political sensitivity, heightened psycho-spiritual acuity, and a deeper sense of ethical significance.

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