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We Alchemists: Playing with Pain, Power, and Potential

Lisa Dumas Neufeld

PART 2 of 3

She had beautiful eyes. I was holding her hand. One week earlier, she had been pronounced dead in the ambulance. They had resuscitated her, and here she was at a point of intense readiness. This was not the first time that she had overdosed, and despite losing everything (including the care and custody of her son), she had always gone back to the drugs. Let us not get it twisted; when one is tangled in a destructive cycle, its lure and its lies are *powerful*. She was ready now, though. I had some experience and resources that could possibly help, so she approached me for guidance. We would meet or talk on the phone as she walked by the river, and we started the work of untangling her beliefs, patterns, and practices that were supporting her destructive cycle. When one has slowly and progressively woven all areas of life into a cocoon of Risk (often over decades of “practice”), the potential is there for the individual to crack it open and emerge, but sometimes it never opens. That is what happened with Alexa. We started to build a relationship and do the work of changing, but her cycle was too powerful. That is the reality here. There is no “magic pill,” and the endings are not always happy, but there **is** hope, and that is why we keep doing the work. This is the *Magnum Opus*, the Great and Urgent Work. We keep connecting, funding programs, and working with people, hoping for supporting transformation. Then, we let go of the outcome.

The Shift

One of the terms that we can use to understand the shift from productive to destructive is an ancient one. It may seem strange today to use a concept like Alchemy, but it works here. Alchemy has been defined as a “seemingly magical process of transformation, creation, or combination.” For our purposes, the process has three necessary elements which lead to change: decisive readiness, resources, and relationships. These, in combination, open an individual to the process of Reconstruction. **Readiness** is at the core of any transformative process. The individual must have a hunger to change and the fire to keep them going, even when motivation drops. To move out of destructive patterns and lifestyles, **resources** become the sirens, luring starving students to school and attracting struggling, broken parents to seek support. When resources are shared safely and consistently, **relationships** develop. Within the context of such a grace-full relationship, the precious process of total **reconstruction** begins.

Alchemy has a very practical component, as well as an ethereal, even mystical, quality. It is called grace, a mysterious matrix that permeates the process and the relationships created. It provides structure and fuel for the journey. For the alchemy to unfold, an interchange of compassion and forbearance are necessary within the relationship. As a person transitions from a Destructive Efficacy Cycle to a productive one, it is going to get messy. It might even seem like change is not happening. The person with whom you are working may even relapse back to old ways of being and behaving. This is part of the process. It is necessary to breathe in that grace and dig for the willingness to witness the gifts and resilience that are inherent in yourself and in the individual with whom you are working. In the first four years of its growth, the Chinese Bamboo plant only shows a small green shoot above the ground. During that time of seemingly no-growth, its energy is spent rooting deeply underground, and in the fifth year of its life, that plant can grow up to eighty feet tall.

Resilience

When exploring resilience, it is important to be a “talent scout” (as I’ve heard Dr. Ken McCluskey say in passing) and to try to uncover what already exists inside the person with whom we are working. There is a certain resilience that develops as a by-product of complex trauma. For one young gang leader, “[The abuse continued] ‘til I was seventeen. That was the last time he put his hands on me because I guess I was able to finally take him down, like...I knocked him out cold, and my mom got mad at me and threw me out of the house. So that’s the last time he ever laid hands on me.” (Comack, 2013, p 64) Though a violent response, this is the way that some of our youths are navigating and negotiating for what they need (In his case, safety). My own son (now twenty-one years-old) developed a sense of resilience as a by-product of adverse childhood experiences as well. One evening in the kitchen, I asked him how it felt to grow up with my ups and downs during the process of my reconstruction (which began in earnest when he was eight or nine). He shared that on one hand, he was never sure what to expect and had to grow up quickly. On the other hand, he said, he learned how to read people and situations to keep himself safe and get his needs met. Sometimes strength and wisdom come from growing up in the wake of a destructive cycle. Perhaps our job, then, is to be present to support a shift—to help guide, into a new direction, the gifts that have emerged out of pain.

According to Michael Ungar (2017), “In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being and their capacity (individually and in groups) to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways.” A person with a healthy, functioning internal compass will look for ways to sustain their well-being. For those of us living in the Realm of Risk, our environment, our patterns, and our practices can drive us to navigate and negotiate toward things that feed and maintain our destructive cycles. In either case, it’s the *drive* that carries the potential, for it holds the precious energy of resilience. That power is available to feed and maintain either efficacy cycle. It is imperative for us to recognize and honor the resilience that the risky ones *already possess*—even if it is misguided and misused. What level of resilience is needed to live the life of an eleven-year-old drug-dealer or a forty-two-year-old prostitute living with her belongings in plastic grocery bags? What level of resilience is needed to maintain a heroin addiction or show up at school day after day, illiterate and invisible? *Deep* levels of resilience, *unimaginable* levels of resilience are needed. The key is in refocusing that energy. Einstein said that “energy cannot be created or destroyed; it can only be changed from one form to another.” We learn to honor and harness the resilience that is there, and then we use it to flip the efficacy cycle from destructive to productive.

“Although the alchemists considered lead the lowest of the base metals, they treated it with a great deal of respect... Lead was said to carry all the energy of its own transformation, and it was that hidden energy that the alchemists sought to free. To the alchemists, the ancient metal was a powerful, sleeping giant with a dark and secret nature that encompassed both the beginning and end of the Great Work.” (Hauk, D.W.)

Readiness

One afternoon in my late teens, I woke up to my apartment filled with passed-out people and disarray. I was on Independent Living, a program to transition youth in care from group homes or

foster homes to their own apartments. An unsavory crowd often hung their hats at my place—usually other group home kids or friends being released from the Youth Centre with nowhere safe to go. On this day, I woke up and looked around at the filth and clutter. As I sat there with shame and sickness, something stirred inside me. It was a knowing, “This is not how you are supposed to be living.” I scrambled around until I found a piece of red construction paper and a crayon, and I made a list of what I needed to do. There was a readiness that emerged from the despair I felt that day. In that moment, something changed. Not everything changed, but *something* did. More readiness came when I was willing to look honestly at my life. That awareness often leads to the pain-fueled willingness to do something different—to take decisive action.

The drive to take decisive action is also fueled by the hunger-pangs of unmet needs. There was a sale on at Safeway. Boxes of canned

soft drinks were cheap, so we stocked up. Those drinks filled our empty fridge. I kept on opening the refrigerator door and feeling like I had it made. Not long after, I found the off-campus high school that later became my alma mater. I had heard that they offered their students food from Harvest (a local food bank). Despite the canned drinks at home, that is what got me in the door. Another young person’s drive to meet basic needs led them into the arms of a gang: “By the time I was twelve, I had guys selling [drugs] for me, you know what I mean? I wasn’t even selling grams on the corner no more. I had people selling for me. I wouldn’t even have to go and do the dirty work myself... [The resources just catch] a young guy. Especially a young guy with nothing.” Both scenarios are ripe with readiness, driven by a need for resources. I had a program to go to that fed my productive cycle. The young gang leader had a program of sorts to go to as well. The gang life was lucrative—it met his needs and fed his destructive cycle. What programs do we have in place to draw forth the potential and power within hungry people?

While programming and services are vital, the power to transform comes from within the individual, it is not something that we pour in *tabula rasa* style. It’s something that we *educate*, something that we draw forth through access to resources

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and a willingness to connect consciously and consistently. Let us remember that the power is not ours. It lays within the individual and it must be respected.

Resources

“When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don’t blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun. Yet, if we have problems with [other people], we blame the other person. But if we know how to take care of them, they will grow well, like the lettuce.” (Hanh, 1991)

There are two classes of resources, internal and external. Internal resources feed our innate human needs while external resources are linked to the materials and skills that help us to survive and thrive. Martin Brokenleg, Larry Brendtro, and Steve Van Bockern (2002) have explored the internal realm within *The Circle of Courage*. The model outlines four aspects, which, when fed in a productive way, manifest as external balance in the life of the individual. They are the need for Belonging, Independence, Mastery, and Generosity. While tangled within a Destructive Efficacy Cycle, these needs are still met—albeit in a distorted way—as four gang leaders described below:

Belonging

“My cousins used to make me feel good because I would pull off armed robberies good. I’d go steal a car, park it far, go rob a store, you know. I felt good about being good at that, you know what I mean? And then everyone started to notice me around, and then I didn’t have to do that no more.” (Comack, p. 67)

Independence

“I sold a lot of drugs to make money, ‘cause you know my mother couldn’t afford to buy me a pair of shoes that were worth a hundred dollars, or shirts that were worth fifty bucks. So, I kind of made my living off of selling drugs as a teenager to support myself. I used to buy food for myself, you know...You got to do what you got to do.” (Comack, p. 78-79)

Mastery

“We would do it for fun, like, we would time ourselves, you know, like nineteen seconds from me getting in the car, and having that car started, and being gone was my fastest time.” (Comack, p. 78)

Generosity

“I take care of my boys. Like, if I’m in the mall shopping and I look at one of my kids and they’ve got ugly shoes on or ugly pants on, fuck, I’ll dress them right up. To them, that’s gold man. That’s better than any fuckin’ paycheck you give them, man.... That makes them loyal, shit like that.” (Comack, p. 81)

The power to transform comes from within the individual...

When one is predominantly living within a productive cycle, these aspects are fed in a more connected way. In

my case, the ACCESS Education Program helped to meet these needs: I found *belonging* with peers, professors, staff, and with on-site counsellors. The design of the program fed my need for *independence*. Our classes were during the day while my son was at school. This gave me from 9:00 to 4:00 to organize my time and to do what I needed to do. Being in University gave me the space and content to discover and develop my voice. Through my speaking and writing, I developed a sense of *mastery*—not as in being a “Master”—but a sense of being good at something useful. I used these skills to meet my need for *generosity* as I became willing to share my experiences, strengths, and hopes through tutoring and workshops.

In contrast, while living in a receiving home as a young teen, my belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity were found in back alleys on the wrong side of the law, despite my basic external needs being met. This brings us to a paradox in the process. The following table shows a series of possibilities related to internal and external resources.

Making an offering of resources opens the door to transformation, but it does not guarantee it. We can recognize the intricacy of the systems that an individual has put in place to meet their needs and offer them attractive alternatives. Then we watch and see what happens. Sometimes we will be surprised at the emergence of something new, where an individual gets a taste of what a productive cycle feels like, and it begins to take root. It

TABLE 1

Scenario	Internal	External	
A	Destructive	Destructive	Immersed in the Realm of Risk. Meeting internal and external needs in a destructive way.
B	Destructive	Productive	Enrolled in an alternative school. Basic needs for food, transportation, and education are met. Still meeting internal needs through an abusive romantic relationship.
C	Productive	Destructive	Connected with a mentorship program. Feeling connected and a sense of mastery while learning about his/her gifts, etc. Incarcerated father, sole provider, still selling drugs to feed mother and younger sister.
D	Productive	Productive	Enrolled in an alternative program which feeds external needs. Has a good relationship with teacher and counsellor. Learning new skills to connect with others. Has opportunities to share his/her gifts.

is in this fertile ground that deep reconstruction can occur—provided there is access to resources within the context of an authentic relationship.

Relationships

“What’s with the lighting in here?” She asked. “My girls can’t work in this. They’d be working with shadows.” She was at my apartment and in my bathroom for a cleaning consultation. I was well into cleaning up my life, but I had left the light bulbs out of it. If one burned out, no matter, I would either stop using the switch, or enjoy the “mood lighting.” Hence, the unlit bathroom. I had been living in that low light for so long that it was the norm. Later that day, I bought a four-pack of bulbs, and I was turning the hallway, bathroom, and bedroom light switches on and off throughout the day and night, deliciously grateful. One role of a helping relationship is to notice those things that are dimly lit. The person living with risk may not even see the issue or the behaviour; it has been that way for so long, just like the frog in the slowly boiling water. Destruction is progressive, but so is the opposite.

A matrix of healing relationships is important to support and enfold an individual who has started to take action to transform. My relationships developed with teachers, mentors, foster parents, family members, healthy friends, and counsellors. Some relationships were short-lived. Some are still developing. Each had a purpose and a teaching for me and gave me an opportunity to practice healthy skills. I needed to learn how to have, and stay in, relationships without running away or sabotaging. I needed to learn how to let love and care into my being. This takes time. In his book, *How to be an Adult in Relationships*, David Richo (2002) shares five keys to mindful connection: Attention, Acceptance,

Appreciation, Affection, and Allowing. In an ideal situation, a helper appropriately offers these things to an individual, and the individual drinks them in and basks in their sunlight. Predictably, though, reality is different. For individuals in the Realm of Risk, there are dragons and bricks that guard the heart. These dragons and bricks are a manifestation of Disordered Attachment.

Disordered Attachment

When a child has healthy attachment with adults around them, it leads to secure connections and productive efficacy. When, for a myriad of reasons, these attachments don’t develop ideally, as described below, it leads to a Destructive Efficacy Cycle.

Secure attachment is not provided when the primary caretakers are not available, usually due to their own insecure attachment and/or trauma and addictions. Without therapeutic recovery, individuals who are insecurely attached are unable to provide secure attachment to their infants and children. They do not have the embodied experience of secure attachment in their nervous system.” Also, people who have unresolved trauma are less likely to be able to provide secure attachment as caregivers because trauma reduces our relational capacity. “According to the polyvagal theory, being in shutdown (immobility/freezing/ or collapse) or in sympathetic arousal (fight or flight) greatly diminishes a person’s capacity to receive and incorporate empathy and support. The facility for safety and goodness is nowhere to be found. To the degree that traumatized people are dominated by shutdown, they are physiologically unavailable for face-to-face contact and the calming sharing of feelings and attachment. (Levine, 2010)

This collection of experiences leads to Avoidant, Anxious, or Disorganized attachment patterns which stand in the way of change, for it is within healthy collaboration that reconstruction happens.

Avoidant

“The avoidant attached child learns early in life to suppress the natural desire to seek out a parent for comfort when frightened, distressed, or in pain.... They develop a pseudo-independent orientation to life and maintain the illusion that they can take complete care of themselves. As a result, they have little desire or motivation to seek out other people for help or support.” (Catlett)

Anxious

“Children with an anxious attachment pattern tend to cling to their attachment figures and often act desperate for their attention.” (Catlett)

Disorganized

“They may act in ways that do not make sense, demonstrating unpredictable, confusing, or erratic behavior in relationships... It may be difficult for them to open up to others or to seek out help.” (Firestone)

She was a youth care worker in the group home in which I had been placed. We connected immediately over cigarettes and social issues. We would sit on overturned buckets on the back patio, reggae blaring, as I smoked other people’s leftovers. I dreamt of having a fresh and full package of *Export A Gold* cigarettes, just like she did. We grew closer and closer over time, once even drawing her into a quiet basement to read her palms and her experiences, sharing sweets and stories. But then the fear would come. Shards of anxiety and threads of worry that it would all end, that she would leave, that she would stop liking me, that she would like another girl more than me. So, I would pull away, run away, lie, steal, and randomly spice it up with a little clinginess.

In his Education Today class, Alan Wiebe started by saying that education was about “Relationships, Relationships, Relationships.” Maintaining a relationship can be a very painful process for people with attachment disorders. Our internal systems have malfunctioned so that bad feels good and good feels raw and awkward and scary. When I was learning to date in a healthy way after a *long* self-imposed hiatus, I found myself attracted

to people who were unreliable and risky, those who I could not trust, those who brought and triggered chaos and fear within me. When I met one former love, I had moments of terror. He was safe. He was reliable. He was nurturing, and I wanted to run. The same struggle exists in relationships that are designed to help. If our internal system has been programmed in one way, when we change that program, through a healthier relationship with a counsellor or teacher or mentor or sponsor, it is not a smooth procedure. The trust process involves repeatedly building and testing the trust. For the helper, patience and the ability to not take things personally can comfort. If you give the individual some space while showing that you are there and you care, the bricks can crumble and let the light in by way of an Earned Secure Attachment.

Earned and Secure Attachment

Very much as the original relationship(s) allowed the child to develop, it is ultimately the new relationship of attachment with the [helper] that allows the [person] to change . . . The [helper’s] role here is to help the [individual] both to [carefully] deconstruct the attachment patterns of the past and to [patiently] construct new ones in the present. (Wallin, 2007)

Our internal systems have malfunctioned so that bad feels good and good feels raw and awkward and scary.

We would meet at Second Cup each week. She was a resilient older woman who was willing to help me along my path to healing. There were mornings when she would come in, tight-lipped and sharp-tongued. Guilt and shame and thoughts of, “What did I do to make her upset?” would flood my mind and my heart each time this happened. One day, I mustered the courage to ask, “Are you mad at me?” She replied that she had a rough morning and would tell me directly if she felt upset with me. It was nothing to do with me. Each time she would come in irritably, I would have to remind myself that it was not me that had made her mad. Here, a very young part of myself, once bathed in complex trauma and co-dependence, was being deconstructed. Each week as we would meet, each time she would come in “off,” I became more and more peaceful, knowing that it was not because of me. I constructed a new concept *through* the relationship—that I was

not responsible for other people's feelings. I was responsible to be honest and vulnerable and to directly ask questions that were burning inside and then to integrate the answers.

Here, we work to weed out the old, defunct patterns and issues as we feed the system with the new behaviours and experiences. It happens simultaneously, sometimes quickly and sometimes slowly. We must recognize that the defunct patterns with which we are faced were often incubated in a context of adverse experiences. We are dealing with a very young part of a person when we do this work; sometimes the behaviour of a seemingly tough, seventeen-year-old may resemble a six-year-old pushing limits and breaking down.

The trust process involves repeatedly building and testing the trust.

There are a few qualities in a healing relationship that create a safe "container" for total reconstruction to occur. Firstly, a consistent **presence** is necessary so that the individual knows what to expect when they are with us. During our time together, our focus is on *listening, asking, and noticing* patterns of behaviour and burnt-out light bulbs. Next, effective **self-disclosure** can be employed. Having *observed, accepted, and processed* our own experiences, we appropriately share stories of our own resilience and struggles; we share our humanness. As we share our hopes and triumphs, we spark aspiration. When sharing, be prepared for specific, even nosy, questions. The way you respond can build trust. Responses like: "That's personal," "I plead the fifth," or straight silence are appropriate if a question goes too far. **Boundaries** are necessary for building trusting, respectful relationships. You can lay boundaries around how much time you will spend and which activities you are willing to do with the person. After a connection has developed, it may be helpful to have an upfront discussion to clarify what the parameters of the relationship will look like and to re-visit the topic as necessary. In time, you may want to push some boundaries in the name of growth. If you are noticing a distinct pattern, you may ask about it or bring up some strategies or resources to work with it. These practices will lead to a parallel process of trust and compassion.

He was in grade two. He was tiny and strong, and he brimmed with brilliant questions, an amazing vocabulary, and a *forceful* anger. He marinated in a broth of changing medications, additional diagnoses, and intense intergenerational trauma. He often worked beside me, or at times, under my desk with a clipboard and a small lamp. Sometimes I could "smell" the storm coming. Sometimes it was like a light switch. He would scream and growl and swing and spit, throw fire extinguishers and supply bins and office chairs; he would smash lamps, shred his work, and toss anything else in his path. Often, when he had calmed down (soothing himself by sitting under my desk in my recycling bin), he was expected to "fix" what had been done by cleaning up the aftermath. Other days, when we could not de-escalate the situation, he would return the following day. Those mornings, he would often sidle up beside me with his bag of non-fiction books and his collection of tics, and whisper "I love you, Ms. N." And, although I would feel distant (even resentful at times), "I love you, too." would escape my mouth. I would accept his affection. I learned that his behaviour was not personal and that every day was a new day. He was trapped in a destructive cycle—trust, test, sabotage, repeat. He needed to see that I would still be there with a patient presence and clear boundaries.

Lisa Dumas Neufeld is a Métis-Menmonite educator, writer, speaker, and alchemist from Winnipeg, Manitoba. She uses her personal and professional experiences to serve and share in the areas of Indigenous Education, trauma, addiction & recovery, transformation, and reconciliation. She can be reached by email at: Lmvneufeld@gmail.com

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