

# Thriving

children • youth • families

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 Growing Edge Training online journal



## **We Alchemists: Playing with Pain, Power, and Potential**

*Lisa Dumas Neufeld*

## **PART 3 of 3**

### **A Parallel Process**

Often, while working with others, we are brought face to face with our own triggers and dragons and destructive powers. The willingness to *know*, *heal*, and *witness* ourselves becomes very important to maintain transformative relationships and feed our own cycles productively.

#### **Know Thyself**

In the same way that we seek to be a presence in another person's life, assisting in the alchemy means that we need to become consciously present in our own lives—with our experiences, the feelings and sensations that emerge. We begin to listen to our inner workings and notice our patterns and where we get “stuck” and triggered.

When we know ourselves in this way, it helps us better know and work with others where they are stuck and triggered. “To relate with others compassionately is a challenge. Really communicating to the heart and being there for someone else—our child, spouse, parent, client, patient, [student] or the homeless woman on the street—means not shutting down on that person, which means, first, not shutting down on ourselves. This means allowing ourselves to feel what we feel and not pushing it away. It means accepting every aspect of ourselves, even the parts we don't like.” (Chodron, 1997, p.104)

#### **Heal Thyself**

“All of us are in relationships every day of our lives, but particularly if we are people who want to help others...something we soon notice is that the person we set out to help may trigger unresolved issues in us. Even though we want to help, and maybe we do help for a few days or a month or two, sooner or later someone walks through that door and pushes all our buttons. We find ourselves hating those people or scared of them or feeling like we just cannot handle them. This is true always if we are sincere about wanting to benefit others. Sooner or later, all our own unresolved issues will come up; we'll be confronted with ourselves.” (Chodron, p.105) And this is where the task of being with what

comes up, examining it, and processing it, with the help of writing or counselling, comes in. This will take our helping practice to a deeper level. Again, we will be more effective and credible with risky people when we have walked the healing path ourselves.

#### **Witness Thyself**

We could be there, feeling off guard, not knowing what to do, just hanging out there with the raw and tender energy of the moment. This is the place where we begin to learn...We're so used to running from discomfort, and we're so predictable. (Chodron, p.151) To experience the connection and the relationship in this way allows the individual to awaken the sleeping giant without our forcing the issue. On one of my last calls with Alexa, she was rationalizing a recent relapse. Instead of

being with her in that raw and tender energy, I felt angry. I felt like “enough was enough,” and I got quite firm with her, fearfully force-feeding her tips and “suggestions” and telling her what to do to get back on track. Giving strong, sharp, and *unasked for* advice was my way of running from my own discomfort. What if I would have allowed that feeling of “not knowing what to do” to soften the situation? When we offer raw presence in relationship, without the ordering around and hard-core advising, we are more likely to *sustain* the relationship. And this, in a sustained relationship, is where the rubber hits the road; this is where the alchemy really happens.

#### **Reconstruction**

Like resources, reconstruction also has an internal and an external component. The process involves diffusion and infusion; the old ways are dissolved, and the new ways are introduced and cultivated. Within the context of the relationship, our role is to offer presence, support, and boundaries as the person makes the shift. We can explore and support the process in the ways outlined below. Please note that this process is not done *for* the person, this is done *with* the person.

## 1) Notice and Name

- a. What is the biggest issue that the individual is facing?
- b. What subsidiary practices and patterns support this issue?
- c. What subsidiary patterns and practices have emerged out of the issue?

Internal Patterns	External Practices
Complexes • Beliefs • Thoughts • Emotions • Memories • Aspirations	Community interactions Ritualized behaviour • Active addictions • Self-harm • Eating disorders • Criminal behaviour • Avoidance • Truancy • Discourse
<i>Internal Manifests as External</i>	

## 2) Explore and Connect

- a. Honor the Patterns and Practices
  - i. What needs are being met through the patterns and practices?
  - ii. How is the pattern or practice affecting the person mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually?
- b. Uncover Possibilities and Aspirations
  - i. Can the same need be met in another way?
  - ii. What could the future look like?
- c. Possible Solutions and Struggles
  - i. Which programs, resources, and materials are needed to begin transitioning from destructive patterns and practices to productive ones?
  - ii. What are some likely struggles that will be faced?
  - iii. What are some resources, programs, or materials that could help with the struggle?

## 3) Uncover and Introduce

- a. Structure
  - i. What simple daily routines can be put in place to create new patterns and practices?
- b. New Community
  - i. Which community can this person connect with?

The group should help with accountability, day-to-day support, and be a place where the person can help and receive help from others on the path.

Patterns and Practices for Healing	
12 Step Programs	Counselling
Mindfulness	Psychiatry
Meditation	Nutritional Therapy
Affirmations	Exercise
Mantras	Mentorship
Videos	Daily Routines
Books and Audiobooks	Bodywork
Cultural teachings	Training: Leadership
DBT tools	Training: Skill-based
CBT tools	Training: ACCESS

## 4) Practice and Nurture

- a. Physiological Considerations
  - i. How is the body and brain linked to the patterns and practices?
  - ii. What practices and patterns heal the brain and body?
- b. Neuroplasticity
  - i. How will we support and understand acute withdrawal from the patterns and practices?
  - ii. How can we support and understand *Post-Acute Withdrawal Syndrome*?

Look at daily routines, community relationships, programs, and resources.

People will have trouble leaving destructive patterns and practices behind because they seem to meet deep internal and real external needs. Through the framework above [(Dumas) Neufeld, 2018], we deal with one piece of the puzzle at a time, often focusing on the wound that is “bleeding the most” or causing the most pain. This is where we will find the emergence of readiness. In my journey, when I dealt with one destructive pattern or practice, two things would happen: 1) many subsidiary patterns and practices would “naturally” fall away and, 2) a (or series of) co-existing issue(s) would emerge. For example, a teenage Meth addict stops using with the help of a residential treatment program. At the same time, he stops selling his body and removes himself from his primary abusive relationship. He is no longer re-traumatizing himself. At the same time, his habit of thievery, manipulation, and bulimia amps up. Once the person stabilizes from the first change (think several months to a year), we can look at the co-existing issues. This is the quick and slow, messy process of transformation. If there is no viable alternative, and often in the process of learning new ways to meet needs, an individual will hang onto one or more destructive patterns and practices.

### ***Transformation—whether individual or collective—happens in the presence of a community, in the presence of relationship.***

Raven was tall and solid and beautiful. Her mother had put her to work on the street as a pre-teen prostitute. We ended up fast (and incongruent) friends when she got out of the Youth Centre and moved into a group home where I was staying. One evening, about six months after moving in, she was *very* dressed up and *very* on her way to “work.” A group of us were begging her not to go. I remember her walking to the bus stop under the streetlamps into that dark night, in her dark skirt, looking back at us. Even though some of her external needs were met, the pull of her old practices was too great. This is no fairy tale, but when a person is ready, reconstruction is possible within the context of real relationships.

I was in my late twenties and still working with my tight-lipped mentor. Part of our work was for me to look openly at my past—at the patterns, the

practices, the pain, and the power. The next piece was that I was to share it with her. I envisioned us sitting in some secluded room as I whispered my secrets and shared the slop of my past. We would meet at the Second Cup week after week. It was here, in the light of day, that I cleared up my past in her presence. And it was here that I was *positive* that she would run from me, abandon me, judge me, fear me, and leave me for good. The process of coming back week after week, crying into my peppermint tea, taught me that opening up was safe, that feeling could happen in the care of another person, and that I sure was not alone. She did not go into much detail about her story at the time but made it very clear that she had been where I was—rubbing my tears into tables and peeling apart cup holders as I peeled my destructive cycles apart. This was the beginning of my own alchemy. I was reconstructing patterns and practices within her presence.

### ***The Reality***

Mornings are teachers of transformation. The light emerges gently. It progresses gradually and silently. The light is present as the darkness leaves with the rotation of the Earth. The Sun does not give up or stop shining or choose to shine only on that part of land that is getting the brightest quickest or give advice on hurrying-up to the darkness. It is a patient, non-aggressive presence.

There will be times, as an individual shifts from a Destructive Efficacy Cycle to a Productive Efficacy Cycle that the destructive behaviours will seem stronger, even though there are productive changes happening. This is part of it. Sometimes we will notice a shift, and just when the destructive seems strong, the productive will shine through in a tiny, delicious moment of grace. Or the opposite will happen. The productive will be growing and rooting, and the destructive will flare up. This is part of the mess. There are no guarantees. The important thing is that we remain present, we hold hope, we act, we work with ourselves, and we work to honor the resilience in those we are helping. We keep on keeping on, just like the Sun does, regardless of the result.

Sometimes, this task will feel overwhelming, and it is, when we try and carry it all by ourselves. Transformation—whether individual or collective—happens in the presence of a community, in the presence of relationship. The results and the Work are not only in our hands. Within the process of transformation, there is an accumulation

of grace from this helper, that teacher, this grandmother, that mentor, this sponsor, that uncle, this professor, that author. There is a succession of goodness and grace that will lead the alchemist to transformation. It is the same way that the Sun leads a flower to growth and the Mystery leads a butterfly out of her cocoon. Trust that a series of small, seemingly insignificant, steps will build upon each other until something new and beautiful is created. I know this in my bones because it's what I have lived.

In the end, a person needs to have a decisive drive to change and the supports within which to do that. A deep readiness will propel someone to find the support and will keep them on the path, even when the aspiration for alchemy fades. There is no quick fix here, but we do need to have the context prepped with the resources—the healthy, trained people, and the programs to support when that point of readiness is reached. We have to be ready when that kid gets kicked out or is sick of selling themselves or tired of huffing hairspray in the alleyways. We need to have a new cycle for that person to step into. If we do not, you can bet the gangs will. The jails and the psychiatric wards and the liquor marts will have something there for that person. So, we had better, too. There were teachers who had boxes of dishes there for me and expired food bank food there for me and tables of second-hand sweatshirts there for me and barefoot political discussions over cigarettes there for me. There were programs that had counselling there for me and open office doors there for me and computers with internet there for me. We need to be ready. It is our only realistic chance for helping people transmute their pain into power and their destruction into production, so that they can help the next ones in line. It has been said that “hurt people hurt people.” I would like to add that healed people heal people.

My friend's daughter liked to keep her room dark. She would not pull the blinds no matter how much my friend pleaded. Last week, my friend bought her daughter two small bamboo shoots to care for. Her daughter now opens the blinds—*daily*.

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