Trauma is a common human experience, and a personal process in occurrence and impact. What is often perceived as traumatic for some, may simply be discarded by others as life’s events. Yet early trauma, particularly that sense of abandonment, often causes the child unbearable pain and suffering that cannot be processed by the psyche due to the ego’s immaturity. This overwhelming affect causes a state of psychic numbness and dissociation, bringing one face to face with what Winnicott calls ‘primitive agonies’, and Kohut refers to as ‘disintegration anxiety’, the deep anxiety that one’s self is disintegrating, “threatening total fragmentation and estrangement from body and mind” (Kalsched, 1997, p.83).

Winnicott referred to the deep level of anxiety in early trauma, what Kalsched calls ‘archetypal anxiety’, as a result of failures in the earliest physical and mental holding of the infant by its mother. The child thus does not experience states of unintegration that is a necessary precursor to relaxation and play, but is threatened with total annihilation, which must be avoided at all cost (Kalsched, 1998). Disintegration is then a defense of the Self against archetypal anxieties which would threaten its existence. To survive, the psyche creates an inner protector, preventing full experience of overwhelming affect, which would surely engulf the immature ego. These emotions are instead “dissociated, encapsulated, evacuated into the body, later to appear as physical symptoms, or acted out in a blind repetition compulsion” (Kalsched, p.84). This splitting becomes the primary manner in which the person organizes affective experience in the future. Winnicott states “the person continues to live but lives falsely, terrified of a future breakdown that has already been experienced (1963, p.90)

The purpose of these defenses is what Bion referred to as attacks against linking
(1967). For the traumatized psyche, integration threatens a re-experience of the unbearable affect, thus any attempt at connection among the components of experience are automatically attacked. The Self’s inner protector, what Kalsched (1998) refers to as a ‘tyrannical caretaker’ (p.96), prevents any meaningful association between affect and image, symptom and emotion, mind and body. The result is “an attack on the potential symbolic space between self and other, which Winnicott calls transitional space” (Kalsched, p.96). In normal ego development, this place is where the child learns to play, and use symbols. With repeated trauma, the immature ego is split from the psyche, and the person is caught between illusion and reality. The transitional space is also split, activating as the container for fantasy, a further state of dissociation, “A kind of melancholic self-soothing compromise - a defensive use of the imagination in the service of anxiety avoidance.” (Kalsched, 1997, p. 106) This pathology of the symbolic function keeps consciousness split off from the psyche, preventing the person from a sense of integration and wholeness.

In therapy or analysis, these patients often present with extreme resistance, primarily for purpose of self-preservation. Despite their suffering, the self-destructive patterns enforced by their inner protector undermine therapeutic progress. Although they seek help, and believe in their need for change, they often feel helpless in the grip of their resistance. Kalsched refers to this intrapsychic factor the trickster archetype, Hermes Mercurius (1997). Usually referred to “as an agent of mediation and integration, as well as the union of opposites,” (Kalsched, 1997, p.95), Mercurius is present in its diabolical form in the unconscious of patients suffering from early trauma. In these cases, “it attacks the inner world, tears it apart, or tries to dissolve it in order to keep it
away from unbearable anxiety (Kalsched, 1997, p.95). Similar to the alchemical state of *solutio*, this state is experienced as fragmentation and dismemberment, an annihilation of self. Mercurius defends the psyche against unbearable anxiety through self-soothing rituals, addictions, repetition compulsions, conversions into bodily symptoms, and projecting onto external objects. Eventually, these traumatic anxieties often come forth in dreams. Jung stated that:

> A traumatic complex brings about dissociation of the psyche. The complex is not under the control of the will...it forces itself tyrannically upon the conscious mind.
> The explosion of affect is a complete invasion of the individual, it pounces upon him like an enemy or a wild animal. I have frequently observed that the typical traumatic affect is represented in dreams as a wild and dangerous animal - a striking illustration of its autonomous nature when split off from consciousness.

(Jung, 1928a, paras 266-7)

The dissociated traumatic anxiety, unintegrated in the consciousness due to the lack of symbolic function, will often present itself as wild and violent imagery in dreams. The archetypal rage, depicted in the image of dismemberment, may be a way into the unthinkable affect, not otherwise available. In therapy, most of these dream images appear once the safe container has been established, and patient begins to share childhood pain. Once these issues are remembered in the analytic transference, the associative images emerge in dreams.

Although Mercurius tends to function as a mediating factor in Alchemy, unifying differentiated opposites into a third thing in greater *coniunctio*, Edinger has shown its diabolical side in the lesser *coniunctio*, “representing the fusion of substances not yet
completely separated” (1985, p. 211), leading not to rebirth, but to “dissolution of the ego in addiction-like states” (Kalsched, 1997, p. 107). In this lesser coniunctio, he appears as Hermes, pulling the immature ego into a state of non-differentiation and projective identification, where “self and object are not clearly differentiated.” (Kalsched, 1997, p. 107) Edinger and Kalsched refer to this stage as normal development of the differentiation process, yet the traumatized psyche can become stuck here, and retreat into the safety of the self-care system.

The patient embedded in lesser coniunctio often presents as vulnerable, needy, and infantile, yet inflated, arrogant and resistant. If the therapeutic container has been properly established, the patient’s unconscious material can be evacuated onto the clinician. Working with symptoms, complexes, and dream images in the transference will facilitate the sacrifice of the illusion of self-care and oneness, thus illuminating the abandonment trauma at the core of psyche’s fragmentation. Edinger suggests that lesser coniunctio is often the first stage of individuation, and must be subjected to other alchemical procedures, in particular mortificatio (death of the king) and separatio (sacrifice of an innocent baby), for true transformation of the Self (1985).

The sacrifice of the illusion of a fantasy world, in which one must acknowledge abandonment and loss, can feel impossible for the traumatized person, and without a good enough container, may be highly unlikely. This process is often accompanied by much pain and suffering, intensifying the workings of the Self-care system to prevent the re-experiencing of the original trauma. This can explain the grip of addictions and compulsions, for no matter how destructive the behaviors, the will of the individual is in service to Mercurius, whom Fairbairn called the ‘internal saboteur’ (1981). To protect the
nascent personality from further trauma, he “attacks all integrative connections between affect and image, perception and thought, sensation and knowledge.” (Kalsched, 1997, p. 109) The result is disintegration of the “very capacity for experience itself” (p. 109), and interruption of the individuation process. Mercurius protects by destroying, and just like an autoimmune disease of the body, his attacks on the self lead to further destruction. The traumatized psyche, therefore, destroys itself as the old unbearable affect begins to reemerge. Jung says that Mercurius even drove the alchemists to despair (1967, 13: par 203).

Kalsched has demonstrated that trauma itself does not split the psyche, instead, “an inner psychological agency, occasioned by the traumatic anxiety, does the splitting.” (1997, p.117). He suggests a re-visioning of the “forward movement of the individuation process towards wholeness” (p.115), for the traumatized psyche this unification of love and rage, Eros and chaos, can be disastrous, often leading to disintegration anxiety, despair and possible suicide. For these individuals who lack the symbolic capacity, and the inner wisdom to integrate connections between mind, body and psyche, the transference field in a relational container, becomes significant to work through the primitive agony of traumatic abandonment.

In this rebirth and renewal of the symbolic function, the process towards greater coniunctio can ultimately begin, leading to the unification of the opposites within one’s psyche. Only then can Mercurius incarnate as a “life-giving power like a glue, holding the world together, standing in the middle of between body and spirit” (Jung, 1967, 13: par 214). This capacity to simultaneously hold the opposites, as symbolized in the crucifixion of Christ, is the marriage between Sol and Luna, anima and animus, Eros
and chaos, psyche and ego. This is found in the idea of the Philosopher’s Stone, the symbol for the Self, the ultimate goal of the individuation process. It is the entity, the substance created by the alchemical procedure when it succeeds by uniting the opposites. Edinger refers to this process as the creation of consciousness, “the product of both centers of the psyche, the ego and the self” (1994, p.18).

In this coniunctio of the opposites, the danger lies with over identification with one operation. Edinger warns of the “scorching of the solar fires” (1972, p. 277) in calcinatio, as one is consumed by an uncontrollable anger from the unconscious, or the “extreme cold and benumbing” (p. 277) of the coagulatio, the negative feminine complex in the lunar process. In the midst of this integration, one needs to situate the experience as part of the larger, meaningful process. For the traumatized psyche to acknowledge its shadows and contribute to the creation of the coniunctio, the relational container, whether created by the trusted analyst or a close friend, is essential for the transformation to occur and not be halted prematurely.

The alchemists recognized that in breakdown, a new birth takes place. As Veronica Goodchild suggests in Eros and Chaos, “The coniunctio first takes place in the underworld.” (p.47). It is in those dark moments of alienation and depression, the burning of calcinatio, that the nigredo, the blackness, the old structures that no longer resonate with one’s true essence can dissolve. She further states “these states of aloneness, fragmentation, and dismemberment are necessary to transformation” (2001, p. 47). Von Franz writes (1980): “The urge for individuation, as long as it is a natural inordinate urge, seeks impossible situations; it seeks conflict and defeat and suffering
because it seeks its own transformation.” She adds, “Sitting in Hell and roasting there is what brings forth the philosopher’s stone.” (p. 254)

The meaning of the term Philosopher’s Stone, or the lover of Sophia (Edinger, 1972), implies an actualized wisdom, a feminine embodiment of spirit. Sophia wants movement, breath and creation. To bring undigestible affect into awareness and address the origin of the archetypal anxiety, the unconscious content must further be embodied. Dreams, active imagination, imagery, dance, art, yoga and other forms of imaginative creative expression perform this function. Within a traumatic structure created by early abandonment, the trauma itself serves a protector/persecutor role, preventing the psyche from destruction, as well as conscious awareness and embodiment of the experience. The archetypal energy becomes the death mother, assuming the role of the demon lover, channeling undigestible affect into the physical body, which becomes the “primal scene of the unconscious, carrying the psychosis” (Woodman, 2005, p.33).

The spirit then must transform into image, and “be clothed in matter” (Edinger, 1972, p. 284) to become integrated in consciousness. As Marion Woodman states, “The symbol brings together body, mind and soul, through the creative imagination, constantly transforming.” (1985, p. 88). The image that comes forth is one of Shakti/Kali, Chaos and Eros combined (Goodchild, 2001), the Goddess of death and rebirth, one that preserves and destroys life. With her sword, she ruthlessly dismembers the ego, the old structures that no longer serve life. Her dark and intense power allows for reclaiming of one’s essential wholeness, through imperfections, and chaos. “Kali is death in service of life” (Woodman, 205, p.31).
With the use of imagination, the bridge connecting body and soul, one can bring the unconscious material into awareness. Through the alchemical process of transformation, the original traumatic anxiety can be integrated into the psyche, thus losing its fierce grip on the ego. As the conscious feminine principle is facilitated, the inner marriage between the fragmented parts of the Self can occur, by way of surrender into the archetypal energy, within a strong and safe container. Only then the transcendent will come, and Mercurius serves its essential function in the individuation process.
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