

FALLING WATER: LIFE MYTH EXPLORED
A CREATIVE APPROACH TO LIVING WITH CHRONIC PAIN



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We took them to the edge and bade them fly. They held on.

“Fly!” we said. They held on. We pushed them over the edge.

And they flew.

– Guillaume Apollinaire

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This creative project is a personal narrative that explores my life myth, altered states, and chronic pain through the lens of Process-oriented psychology. It specifically focuses on the creative artistic expressions and altered state experiences that emerged while I experienced severe chronic pain and fatigue, and it demonstrates how those experiences brought me to a deeper recognition, understanding, and integration of my life myth patterns.

This project consists of three parts: my artwork and poetry, my presentation of the artwork, and this essay. In addition to describing all three components of the project, the essay also provides an overview of the Process-Oriented theories and methods relevant to my project, and it suggests potential contributions and future directions for research.

While this essay is academic in nature, the narrative of my life myth is, above all else, a story. All myths are expressed through story, and my own myth is no different – it is a story that is both personal and collective in nature, and in the telling and sharing of it here, I hope that each reader may find something in it that resonates with their own story in some way.

I was motivated to pursue this project for three reasons. The first reason is that I am deeply motivated by a desire to ease my own suffering. One of my beloved teachers, Cherokee elder Dhyani Ywahoo, used to say, “The root of all suffering is *being of two minds, or arguing with your self.*” I am well aware of the suffering that can result from the dualities and arguments that exist within me, and it is therefore my intention and hope to reach a greater understanding and integration of the polarized and marginalized aspects

of my various inner identities, so that I won't waste precious time and energy allowing one aspect of myself to argue another aspect of myself right out of existence.

My second motivation lies in the hope that my project may inspire others to look at and explore their own chronic symptoms, altered states, and life myths in creative and meaningful ways. Allowing space and time for dreaming paths to emerge into consciousness through creative expressions often helps ease the suffering in people's lives, just as it has done in my own life. My hope is that this project will inspire more people to practice living life with an attitude of curiosity and wonder towards our chronic symptoms and altered state experiences, so that life can be more fulfilling and more fun for everyone.

The third reason I chose to do this project is because altered states and chronic illness are both highly marginalized topics within our everyday world, and I therefore want to offer a personal narrative on these aspects of our human experience. I hope that focusing on my own chronic symptoms and altered states will help motivate others to explore and share their own personal and social experiences in these areas. This project is only a small contribution to what I hope is a growing body of research exploring chronic illness and altered states as a meaningful part of people's everyday lives.

Chapter 2: Altered States Are Normal For Me

At this time in our history, most of Western society only recognizes one form of consciousness. Process-oriented psychology refers to this type of mainstream consciousness as *consensus reality*, and it is based on the physical world of form, time, and space, it is governed by linear rational thinking, and it is consensually agreed upon as the “normal” state of our everyday experience. The terms, *altered states of consciousness* and *altered states of awareness* are used to describe the existence of states that somehow differ from the experience of consensus reality (Tart, 1975; Mindell, 2005).

Transpersonal psychology has done its part to introduce our culture to the existence of altered and transcendent states, but such states have been relegated to the margins of society by associating them with drug use, psychosis, or religious fanaticism. The spectrum of altered states is quite broad however, with extreme experiences at one end (e.g., an out of body experience) and subtle experiences at the other end (e.g., the feelings, thoughts, or images that emerge in the liminal space between sleeping and waking). Within this broad spectrum, most if not all people experience some form of altered states in their lifetime, but we nonetheless continue to marginalize altered states by projecting them onto others, or by sweeping them out of our awareness altogether. “They may be disavowed, avoided, ignored, or simply not noticed” (Diamond & Jones, 2004, p. 20), and, even if we do notice them, they are usually labeled as unreal, unimportant, unintelligent, silly, weird, scary, or certifiably crazy.

Despite our tendency to marginalize or pathologize altered states, Process-oriented psychology recognizes them as a normal part of the human experience and as potentially useful psychological tools:

An altered state is any state that is different from the one with which we normally identify. Many believe that special, in-depth methods are needed to enter an altered state. While this can be the case, in our experience altered states are also immediately available to us if we simply notice and embrace a parallel world occurring in the moment. (Mindell, 2005, p. 154)

In this quote, the term “parallel world” is referring to the Process-oriented theory that at least three levels of consciousness exist: *consensus reality*, *dreamland*, and the *essence* or *sentient* levels. These levels of awareness are “parallel” because they exist simultaneously and can be made available to a person at any time by putting attention or awareness onto them. When we are consciously aware of consensus reality, we say that we are in an ordinary, everyday state of awareness. When we are consciously aware of dreamland, we are focused on our nighttime dreams, emotions, fantasies, projections, and moods. When we are aware of our essence or sentient levels, we experience a state of non-duality or a feeling of oneness with all that is, and it is from this wholeness that all the other states arise. Process-oriented psychology suggests that people’s thoughts, feelings, and actions are influenced by all three of these states of awareness, and that getting in touch with these different states can have a positive psychological effect:

The realms of Consensus Reality, Dreamland, and the Essence can also be understood as parallel worlds for one another; all of them exist simultaneously, though we tend to focus on one realm at any given moment. . . . Life without access to all of these dimensions can feel depressing. It is possible to move between these parallel dimensions . . . [and] this fluidity is central to our sense of wellness and creativity. (Mindell, 2005, p. 23)

So although mainstream culture primarily supports our awareness of consensus reality, all three levels of awareness are in fact influencing us, even if we don't know it. Cultivating a conscious awareness of the altered state experiences emerging from our dreamland and essence experiences can be a valuable way of honoring the diversity that makes up the whole of who we are, and it can offer us perspectives that feel less conflicted and foster a sense of wellbeing.

From my early childhood right up to the present moment, I have experienced meaningful altered and transcendent states. In fact, my earliest childhood memory is of a recurring altered state experience I had as a baby. I remember lying in my crib and seeing the moonlight shine in through the window. I was delighted to see individual particles of light dancing around in the moonbeams, and I wanted to join them. So I let myself turn into light particles and I rose up out of my body, floated along the moonbeams, and joyfully became one with the night sky; I merged with the stars and the moon and I was made entirely out of light particles. From the vastness of space I could see my house down below, and I watched my mother sitting and sewing in her chair. Before the morning came I somehow went back into my body. Another profound altered state experience I had as a very young child occurred just before getting into our family car to go on an outing. I remember running across the yard to get to the car first, and I reached up in order to grab onto the shiny handle of the car door. As my hand touched the handle, the sunlight reflected off the metal and shone into my eyes and at that very moment, I transcended my consensus reality experience and felt myself become the sun and the rays of light shining out from the sun. As the sun, I had an ecstatically joyful experience of being *home*, and radiating love to the world. When I returned back to my everyday

senses I remember feeling completely disoriented. I was sitting in the car feeling bewildered because I could not remember how I got into the car, I also could not understand the language that my parents were speaking as they talked to me! I had returned from my altered state, but not completely, because I couldn't understand consensus reality language yet.

I think it must have been about ten minutes before I understood the English language again, and, as I sat and reflected on what had just happened to me, I had a very clear understanding that my family members had not been aware of my *turning into the sun* experience and that other people probably did not have these types of experiences. I realized right then and there that it is not socially acceptable to talk about what happens to us in altered states or to express how we view the world from the perspective of a non-ordinary or non-consensus reality state of consciousness. Nobody invalidated my experience or told me to keep quiet about such things; I just instinctively knew that I shouldn't share it with others because I would be seen as strange, and I couldn't bare the idea that my loved ones might not understand the wonder and pure happiness I felt while I was in altered states. It was also disconcerting to realize that my real HOME was in the sky, rather than on earth, and that the love I felt when I turned into pure light particles was far greater than any love I felt from, or toward, my earthly family. However, as I continued throughout my life to have altered state experiences both big and small, the instinct to keep quiet about them took its toll on me. I felt extremely alone and isolated in the world and the effort to hide these important experiences bred a sense of alienation in me. It was not until I reached my adult years that I first came across a model that recognized and even celebrated non-ordinary experiences, but by that time I had already

internalized the notion that my altered states, and the love I felt while in those states, confirmed that I was abnormal and probably didn't even belong on the earth. This judgmental perspective made me want to hide the non-ordinary parts of myself all the more, and resulted in both conscious and unconscious attempts to marginalize and repress my altered state experiences when in the company of others, but these states were often too strong and resilient to be repressed. Thus, while altered states are *normal* states of consciousness for me because I have experienced them regularly and in various forms throughout my life, and because, in my opinion, they comprise the core of who I am - I still have a strong part of me that thinks my altered state experiences are proof that I don't really belong here on earth, and I don't know how to be *normal*. Despite all of these inner and outer judgments, the altered state experiences themselves *feel so good!* When I am in such states, time stops and my awareness becomes larger than what is psychologically explainable, the boundaries and abilities of my physical body exceed their logical limits, and I feel truly whole. For example, when I was twenty-five years old, I was accidentally shot in the head, and in the moments immediately following, I had a transcendent out of body experience. I literally felt my entire being leave my body and zoom quickly away from the earth. I was traveling at light-speed through a dark tunnel, and at one end of the tunnel I could see the earth getting smaller and smaller, while at the other end, I could see a world filled with bright golden-white light. When I reached the light, it enveloped me in its beauty and warmth; it is hard to find words to describe this light because it was simultaneously light, a glorious musical sound, a strong but subtle vibration, and overwhelming love. I merged with this beautiful light/sound and became one with it. I felt a deep sense of wholeness and homecoming, and I was aware of

thinking, “Oh, I’m home!” but then a voice lovingly replied, “You’re not done yet,” and suddenly I was back in my body and remotely aware that my husband was running with me in his arms and shouting for help.

While my body was coping with a severe traumatic injury in consensus reality, some other part of my consciousness was in an ecstatic altered state. I absolutely cherish and am fascinated by these moments of expanded awareness, and yet, even now after years of working on accepting and celebrating my altered states, there remains a part of me that fears others will find out about my experiences and ostracize me for not being a normal human being. As much as I love my altered states, there is a strong critic within me that relentlessly sides with my social programming, which is full of rules about how to look and behave normally, this inner critic insists that I should not indulge my altered states by focusing on them or by welcoming them. Every chance it gets, my inner critic strongly and disapprovingly lets me know that I’m seriously weird, and that these experiences are childish and a big waste of time and energy. It often screams at me, “If anyone sees you like this, word will get out about how strange you really are, and then you will never have a friend again! Your kids and family will be ashamed of you! You won’t be able to find work, and you will die poor, lonely, in pain, and on the ground in a dirty old alley somewhere. Really, unless you hide your true self, you might as well just die right now, because you will never ‘get’ how to be a normal human being. You really don’t belong on earth at all. Other people know how to live in a human body, but not you! You are stupid, deluded, disgusting, and useless” . . . and so on. It can be really devastating when my critic admonishes me like this, because I have often believed every word of it.

I've spent a lifetime trying to hide the altered state parts of myself, and since these states comprise the biggest portion of my private identity, it takes a tremendous amount of energy to hide them. With this project, I am finally coming out from hiding, and while it is terrifying to be so exposed, it is also a relief. I don't want to expend all the energy it takes to hide and devalue so much of my core identity and life myth process anymore; it depletes me like a long-term case of chronic fatigue. Process-oriented psychology has helped me to value my altered states for the knowledge and perspectives they offer me, and it has also helped me to "break" the ingrained habit of trying to repress my dreaming and essence level experiences right out of existence. It has been a full-time practice for me to cultivate an awareness that allows me to notice when I am marginalizing a part of my altered state dreaming as it tries to seep through into consensus reality. I now want to be able to enter consciously into my altered states in order to know them better, and therefore know myself better. I want to find ways to make use of each altered state's unique point of view, because being able to live fully as a whole human being depends on my ability to allow all the parts of me to contribute to the whole of my identity.

Chapter 3: Living With Chronic Pain And Fatigue

During the four-year period between 2004 and most of 2007, I found myself swimming and sometimes sinking in a world of powerful body symptoms and medical diagnoses, which included intense chronic pain, chronic fatigue, seizures, and cancer. Due to my previous head injury, I had already been experiencing chronic pain and sleep deprivation as a way of life for more than twenty years, but, when cancer, seizures, and chronic fatigue were added to my list of physical challenges, I felt like my world had crumbled to bits, and I struggled to survive the huge mound of fear, anger, and seemingly endless frustration that grew as my symptoms continued to increase.

I am *extremely* reticent to share the consensus reality details of the cause and nature of my chronic symptoms, and yet I have decided to dedicate much of this section to the telling of those details for two reasons. First, they are a critical aspect of my overall story and life myth, and leaving them out would be akin to trying to hide my altered states again. Second, chronic symptoms tend to be marginalized in our society and many people do not feel free to speak out about their experiences with them. I do not want to contribute to this marginalization by remaining silent about my own experiences, so here I go!

In 1982, I was gardening in my rural back yard when I was accidentally shot in the head by a stray bullet. It is likely that this accident resulted from some teenagers who were shooting a gun into the air, but I never did find out who actually fired the gun. The bullet ricocheted off of a tree and went through the top of my head, and when I collapsed onto the concrete patio beneath me, my jaw and left side of my face took the full impact of the fall. The bullet and the fall caused multiple fractures to my skull, jaw, and neck,

and these injuries have resulted in variety of chronic symptoms, which I will do my best to explain here. What follows is a brief description of how ligaments, muscles, bones, and brain tissue have evolved to mitigate the long-term effects of my initial injury, but please keep in mind that the following explanation comes from my very basic and limited layman's understanding of what is taking place inside my body.

When I got shot, the ligaments in my neck were permanently stretched out of shape from severe whiplash, and they could no longer hold my neck bones in place. As a result, my neck muscles had to step up to the job, but they are not really designed for this kind of stabilization. Ligaments tighten and relax when they are holding bones in place, and they allow a limited amount of flexibility to exist in joints, but when muscles have to do the job of ligaments, they are only able to tighten and then tighten some more in their attempts to stabilize the bones. Because the muscles in my neck can never relax, they have formed a very fibrous tissue that attaches to the bones. Unlike actual ligaments, this rigid fibrous muscle tissue does not allow for much flexibility in the surrounding areas (oh dear, this sounds a lot like certain parts of my personality!) which means that my neck muscles must maintain an incredible tension in their attempt to work as non-stop stabilizers.

When I fell onto the concrete patio, my cervical vertebrae were fractured, and these fractures eventually caused arthritis and bone spurs to develop. The fall also caused my vertebrae to shift so that they are no longer properly aligned, and the bones can't "stack up" to stabilize themselves. The resulting weakness of my ligaments, tightness of my muscles, and instability of my bone alignment cause continual muscle spasms in my neck and shoulder area, and, in an attempt to help stabilize my body, an invasive type of

scar tissue has formed around my skull, face, neck, and along the right side of my chest. This tissue looks a bit like a spider web and has long tendrils that keep reaching out and grabbing onto anything near by. As it grabs and grows, it keeps thickening and hardening in efforts to create stabilization. This type of scar tissue decreases the mobilization, alignment, and flexibility of the right upper sections of my ribcage, and it causes tightness and pain as nerves are “squeezed” in the process.

The damage from a bullet passing through my brain causes me to have grand mal seizures. A recent brain MRI has shown that I have extensive brain loss in a couple different areas, and because dead brain tissue retains fluid, it creates pressure in my brain, which can be extremely painful. The swelling in my brain increases when I lie down, so the pain in my head gets worse whenever I try to sleep in a horizontal position. I have tried sleeping at an incline or in a sitting up position, but my neck injuries prohibit me from sleeping in these positions, so sleep deprivation is an ongoing issue for me.

I take several medications to help reduce the swelling in my brain and to prevent the seizures, but the medications can only help up to a certain point, because even simple things like using my arms or turning my head can easily worsen my condition. Unexpected noises or sensory stimulations aggravate my symptoms because my nervous system is hyper vigilant from being in a continual state of pain and sleeplessness. This hypersensitivity has caused me to have an exaggerated startle reflex, which means that the slightest unexpected sound or movement can set my nervous system off in a very big way. The most disruptive manifestation of this pattern happens when I fall asleep and my ears, eyes, nose, or skin receive unexpected stimulation. When this happens, I awaken suddenly with a jerk and adrenalin rushes through my body as if I have just fallen off the

edge of a cliff. I then have to wait until my nerves settle down before I can fall asleep again, and this can take anywhere from a half an hour, to several hours.

My nervous system is also quick to go into a “rapid-fire” mode, which feels like fireworks are exploding inside my head and lightening is shooting through every corner of my brain (see *A Seizure*, p. 151, in the Journal of Artwork and Poetry section). While seizures are the most dramatic expression of my nervous system going haywire, a similar but much less intense version of it happens to me almost every day, because any type of physical or emotional stress can activate this super charged fight-or-flight dynamic. The neurologist who was recently explaining the results of my MRI likened my traumatic brain injury to having a whole bunch of hyper vigilant little dogs with machine guns running around inside of my head. The dogs yip, jump, run in circles barking, and chase anything that moves or makes a noise – the slightest little thing can make those dogs (nerve impulses) go berserk and start shooting off randomly in every direction. I find this image very amusing in light of my recurring childhood nightmare where there was a berserk mafia gang running after me and rapidly firing bullets at my head! (see, *Childhood Dream*, p. 87, in the Journal of Artwork and Poetry section).

My hyper alert nervous system and persistent chronic pain often come together in a “perfect storm” that severely interrupts my sleep patterns. I am often only able to get a few hours of sleep at a time, resulting in a chronic case of sleep deprivation. Thank goodness human beings are adaptable creatures, because I’ve grown accustomed to getting on with my life regardless of the tiredness and the pain. This ability to just grit my teeth and keep going, has enabled me to be quite active in spite of my invisible handicaps; however, I did have to pay a price for constantly pushing my physical limits.

After years of doing more than I was really capable of, my adrenal glands became exhausted, and I was diagnosed with chronic fatigue.

Then, I was diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer! My recovery from the cancer was hampered because the sleeplessness and chronic fatigue compromise my immune system. A relentless cycle began spinning round and round in my life: I needed sleep, but the chronic pain led to sleep deprivation, which aggravated my chronic fatigue, which kept my immune system from fighting the cancer.

So far, I have described my symptoms and their cascading physiological processes, but the description feels incomplete without a portrayal of my struggles to live in the midst of those symptoms. While the chronic pain was certainly an obstacle to sleep and rest, and forced me to continually push my physical and psychological limits, there was an equally strong obstacle posed by my own inner psychology, which pushed me to the very brink of my emotional and psychological limits. I knew that I needed to start living life at a much slower pace and eliminating things that diminished my already miniscule levels of energy, but this meant eliminating things that my very identity revolved around and depended on – an identity that I did not want to give up. I was used to being productive, responsible, and, above all, acting like a *normal* person. Forcing myself into high gear was a regular occurrence for me, and, even in the midst of chronic fatigue and pain, whenever I found a tiny little bit of energy somewhere inside of me, I would immediately go full speed ahead until I had used up every bit of it. Then I would collapse, but only until I found another tiny bit of energy to repeat the whole scenario again, and then again. Of course, this pattern was completely unsustainable because overriding my body's need for a slower pace of life only compounded my adrenal

fatigue, which in turn aggravated all my other symptoms. Still, I resisted the shift, because so much of my identity was inextricably wrapped up in my external productivity in the world. Over and over again, I would slip into crisis mode if my linear mind couldn't organize, plan, and push to *make* things happen. I was addicted to setting and achieving goals as a way of finding meaning in life. I felt that I needed to *do* something in order to create a meaningful life, and just lying in bed and resting – just *being* – did not fit with my idea of meaningful!

I spent many months in a panic about the dilemma of *doing* versus *being*, and the thought of having to go through life at the *extremely* slow pace of *being* made me angry and depressed. I was furious that I could no longer just put a nice little bit of organic food into my body and expect it to go, go, go! “How could this have happened to me?” complained my angry little self. “What happened to my former energetic and happy self? What happened to the *me* who danced Argentine Tango five to seven nights a week, or the *me* who hiked and gardened and got so much done every day? What happened to the *me* who had been a weight lifter for thirty years - the *me* who prided herself on having well defined, bulging muscles? What happened to the *me* who had been fairly patient, positive, and even-tempered? *And who was this incorrigible person who had taken my place? Who was this unproductive, slow, impatient, and irritable character?*”

I hated the “new” me. I hated the monstrous pain that attacked my body and kept me from sleeping and healing. I hated my negativity and irritability. I hated the way I looked and felt. In short, I hated my life, and I became very hopeless and suicidal. I truly believed that everyone around me (myself included) would be better off if I simply died.

And I thought of death delivering me into the warm and blissful light I encountered in my altered states.

Chapter 4: Using Process-Oriented Psychology

Had I not been involved in process-oriented psychology during those four difficult years, I may have stayed in a polarized state of anger and hopelessness until the severity of my symptoms finally killed me, but, thankfully, process-oriented psychology offered me some invaluable tools that helped me learn to survive and even thrive.

When I first discovered process-oriented psychology, I was nearing the end of my bachelor's degree in conflict communication at Marylhurst University in Portland, Oregon, and before that I had also finished many years of indigenous Peacekeeper training, which focused on developing an awareness of one's life purpose and will to choose, wisdom to see, and intelligence to act in ways that support the unity and interrelatedness of all creation. The Peacekeeper training stressed the importance of developing dreaming and altered state aspects of awareness, and also stressed that everything is about relationship, with the belief that we are constantly in relationship with the whole world and with the cosmos as well. There was a focus on participating in all types of relationships as consciously, fully, and compassionately as possible, and this included one's relationship with ones self. It was a challenge to have been in a very rigorous training program for years on end, first as a Peacekeeper student, and then attending Marylhurst University, all the while struggling with chronic pain and sleep deprivation, but I did not want to give up on my educational and personal growth goals.

I was determined to continue *doing* in the world, and, even as I was completing the undergraduate degree, I was already thinking about a postgraduate degree that could somehow bring together my altered state and indigenous world-view training, my conflict facilitation skills, and my interest in art and movement. As I researched potential

academic paths and programs, I happened to notice a class offered at Marylhurst university that was taught by Herb Long, who is a diplomate in process-oriented psychology. The course title was “Human processes: Relationships” and the class description sounded really intriguing because it mentioned exploring *dreaming in relationships*, which sounded like it might bridge areas of my indigenous training and my conflict communication training, so I signed up for it and discovered that the process-oriented theory being taught in the class really helped bring my various interests and studies together into one accessible paradigm. So, after taking four more classes from Herb and learning how process-oriented psychology could be applied to any area of life, I decided to pursue a degree at the Process Work Institute.

Although I was focused on process-oriented psychology as a paradigm that would help me take my learnings and interests out into the world to be shared with others, I did not anticipate how powerfully the training would affect me on a personal level. Process-oriented psychology offered me a language and a paradigm that enabled me to describe and understand the various types of states I experience, from my ‘everyday’ self, to my most extreme altered states, and the acknowledgement and naming of altered states as a ‘normal’ and meaningful human experience facilitated a major turning point in my life. During my darkest and most desperate nights, when my symptoms were at their most acute and life seemed devoid of all meaning, my belief in process-oriented psychology and my ongoing participation in that learning community was the life raft that kept me afloat.

Finding Meaning Within My Symptoms

One aspect of process-oriented psychology that was especially helpful to me was the notion that physical symptoms carry meaning. Early in the development of process-oriented psychology, Arnold Mindell proposed the theory of the *dreambody* to describe the “vital link between dreams and body symptoms” (Mindell, 2002, p. 4). This theory demonstrates how people’s nighttime dreams mirror their physical symptoms, and how a symptom can carry information from dreamland and sentient realms. This perspective was really interesting and relieving to me. I had been so busy fighting my symptoms and somehow blaming myself for having them, that I had never stopped to consider they might actually have *meaning* and a *purpose* behind them! “If you are ill, you are ill *only* from the bio-medical perspective. From another [perspective], you are having big dreams in your body and (in a way) are lucky to receive [these] dramatic messages from the force of silence” (Mindell, 2004, p. 16).

Mindell’s use of the term *force of silence* refers to “the driving force behind your dreams, subtly trying to move you along a given path” (Mindell, 2004, p. 8), and this force can be found behind chronic symptoms, troubling moods, persistent problems, and long-term behavioral patterns (Mindell, 2004). While I felt far from “lucky” for having such strong symptoms, I nonetheless intuitively *knew* that my symptoms were relaying messages from the force of silence, and I was intrigued to find out what these messages from the dreaming realm might be saying.

The very basis of process-oriented psychology lies in the idea that this dreaming is *always* there, we just have to notice its subtle pull, and with loving focus, allow it to unfold and enhance our lives. Those things that seem static – material

objects, frustrating body symptoms that do not seem to change, or unwieldy moods – when approached with wonder and a Zen-like beginner’s mind are found to be processes in the midst of unfolding. (Mindell, 2005, pp. 4-5)

Unfolding and accepting the strong dreaming process behind my symptoms was a difficult long-term project for me, but eventually I was able to receive and integrate the messages that came through. The severity of the chronic pain and fatigue forced me to *have to* honor my dreamingbody, and I began to notice how my life-threatening symptoms were forcing me to embody aspects of myself that I had been marginalizing,. This wasn’t an easy or smooth process; it took a huge paradigm shift for me to finally understand that my irritating and dangerous symptoms were not just happening *to* me, but that they also *were* me. Those insistent, unrelenting, and powerful symptoms (that I hated so much) were in fact aspects of my own dreaming reality and paths of personal power that wanted to be more consciously known and identified with.

Shifting A Fixed Identity And Getting To Know My Various Parts

Many spiritual and eastern traditions have long focused on the importance of letting go of personal attachments. Kornfield (1994) reminds us that “it is not our preferences that cause problems but our attachment to them” (p. 35), and Adyashanti (2004) explains that “to be here, all you have to do is let go of who you think you are” (p. 226). Process-oriented psychology also recognizes the problems that can arise from being overly attached to a fixed identity, and it offers the following framework for understanding the dynamics involved. This paradigm suggests that people have a *primary process*, a *secondary process*, and an *edge* that separates the two:

Primary process refers to those experiences that are better known and closer to a person's sense of identity. Secondary process refers to those experiences that are further from a person's identity. . . . The edge represents the limit of the known identity as well as the point of contact with unknown experiences or identities.

(Diamond & Jones, 2004, p. 20)

For many years, my own primary process was focused on being physically active, and physically productive, in order to feel like I was contributing to the world – this was my most consciously known identity, and it was aligned with the expectations of consensus reality. My secondary process was focused on slowing down and entering sentient altered states – these experiences were further from my known identity and could be seen instead in my body symptoms, which unconsciously forced me into experiencing slower, more internal, and altered states. I did not recognize the slowing down as a part of my identity but as something belonging to the symptoms themselves, and, although I was aware of my tendency to have altered state experiences, I was not valuing this non-consensus reality part of myself the way I valued my primary identity. An edge was separating my known and unknown identities, and I was terrified to acknowledge and unfold my more secondary identities for fear of losing the more primary one.

Sometimes you continue with old paths, even when your heart tells you not to. You may be staying on the path because it is the only one you know. . . . Fears of new roles, financial insecurity, and even closed-mindedness to new experiences keeps you from significantly changing and living your dreamingbody in the world. You feel obliged both to yourself and to others to maintain the personal history you have created. (Mindell, 1993, p. 140).

Even though I cherished my altered state experiences, my strongest focus was to uphold my primary worldly identity. I am a tenacious character by nature, and so I clung to my old doing-oriented behaviors and stubbornly resisted my secondary dreaming process. I saw my secondary process as a huge and powerful enemy, which I had to keep warring against day and night in order to survive. This exhausting fight was really about my agenda to keep my familiar primary identity intact, but the struggle was turning out to be a hopeless endeavor, because when we “marginalize the Dreaming and focus only on the ‘real’ part of things . . . it can be the source of depression or the gnawing feeling . . . that something is missing in life” (Mindell, 2005, p. 5). I did not know it at the time, but a lot of my moodiness and depression was due to having such a fixed primary identity.

The process-oriented terms *little u* and *big U* are also used to describe the difference between primary and secondary identities and perspectives. “In everyday reality, all we identify with is the primary process, the ‘dream ego’—the little u” (Mindell, 2007, p. 44), but “the big U is the thread connecting all your dream fragments. It is the sum of all your parallel worlds and contains the major direction of your life . . . the core of who you are” (p. 44). My everyday mind, my *little u*, was so busy resisting my secondary body signals that I could not see the forest through the trees – I could not see the larger life direction being offered up by my *big U*. Eventually I reached the point where I had to either “agree with that [big U] force and move with it, or disagree and be destroyed. It is useless pretending this force does not exist, for ignoring its presence turns it into a terrifying event of body symptoms” (Mindell, 2004, p. xiii).

Indeed, my body symptoms went wild and amplified in severity as I tried to deny the background dreaming emerging through them. When my symptoms, frustrations, and

loneliness reached such an acute state that I came close to dying from severe illness and suicidal tendencies, it was not my physical body that needed to die and leave this world; rather it was my old fixed identity that needed to perish in order for my dreaming self to emerge more fully.

Death itself may seem to be lurking behind every tree as you move far from your path. However, the point of all these perceived threats, symptoms, and events may not be to kill you but only threaten – shake up, loosen up – your little u. The threat of death mainly serves to loosen the primary identity’s hold on life. (Mindell, 2007, p. 138)

My body symptoms were relentless in their attempt to strip my primary identity down so that other aspects of myself could emerge more fully:

Chronic illness, feelings of being torn asunder by opposing forces, and near-death experiences frequently have the goal of “cleansing” you from your own self and refilling you with nothingness or with pure nature. During such difficult times, you are forced to undo yourself, to go to pieces, to free yourself from the tendency to think of yourself at any given time as one type of person with one type of task. Either you become fluid, or nature erases you in its own way. (Mindell, 1993, p. 48)

Thankfully, my studies in process-oriented psychology helped me to *consciously* loosen up my primary identity, and move more fluidly between all the different parts of my internal landscape. I kept reading and striving to apply process-oriented theories and methods to my seemingly impossible situation, and slowly I learned the art of listening to and valuing my various parts. “Parts that are disliked or unknown are recognized and

encouraged to interact. The interaction then becomes a vehicle for the conscious integration of previously marginalized parts” (pp. 90-91). Taking this method to heart, I began unfolding parts of myself that I had previously tried to avoid, especially the parts that surfaced through my body symptoms and moods. I explored the slow part, the angry part, the hopeless part, the critical part, the tired part, the tire-less part, the passionate part, the frozen part, the non-local part, the earthy part, the transcendent part, the peaceful part, the violent part, the scared part, and many, many more. All this exploring led me to a deep appreciation of the diversity within myself, as well as diversity between people, and in the world in general. I began to feel less alienated from others as I was more able to access a larger identity within myself because such process work methods help “people to drop their sense of self, become more aware of the way in which they separate themselves from the ‘other,’ and develop a more fluid and multifaceted identity” (Diamond & Jones, 2004, p. 14).

I worked on unfolding the process behind these different parts, which “involves noticing a secondary or NCR [nonconsensus reality] experience in the initial description of the problem, amplifying its expression until a new meaning or aspect of identity emerges, and then integrating the new experience into everyday reality” (Diamond & Jones, 2004, p. 23). I tried hard to notice when a part was “up” in me, and then I tried to get my everyday mind out of the way so that each part could let itself be known more completely. I daydreamed about how the parts would interact with one another, I wrote poems about it, I made pictures in my mind and on paper, and I meditated and invited these various parts of my inner psychology to freely express their individual worldviews in the space I had set aside for them. I tried to be aware of when certain parts burst onto

the scene uninvited. I tried to welcome everything – even the parts of me that were against welcoming any other parts! What a circus! What a lot of crazy, colorful wisdom!

When given the chance, it turned out that each part had something important to say, each part held an integral piece of this weird and wonderful puzzle that is *me*. I was amazed to realize that even my brutal inner critic had something helpful to offer, because this part of me *really means business* and wants me to WAKE UP NOW! It mercilessly pushes me over major edges again and again, and, in doing so, it ushers me into living a fuller life, and into remaining devoted to my big U path. Consciously inviting my critic into a dialogue also afforded me an opportunity to see this devastating messenger as merely one more role in my life myth play. Viewing my critic as just one of many voices lessened the grip of terror that its tirades had on other parts me, so that those other parts could actually debate with the critic, while I stood back and watched them all jump into the fray and get to know each other better.

Getting to know all of my various parts, and flowing back and forth between them has helped me to shift my little u's fixed identity so that the diversity of my whole being can find acknowledgment and expression. Of course, I cannot maintain such a fluid identity at all times, but, when I'm able to allow a flow between my inner parts, it usually helps to take the edge off my body symptoms. Consciously making room in my life for all the parts of myself means that I am not marginalizing the energy of the symptoms, and when this energy has the ability to express itself, it releases the backlog of power behind my body symptoms. As much as these process-oriented methods have helped to relieve the intensity and frequency of some of my symptoms, chronic body symptoms are still a part of my daily life and they are still challenging to live with, but the big difference now

is that I don't expend my much needed energy hating them and fighting against them as I once did, and I even see them as essential players in the larger scheme of my life myth.

Tracking My Life Myth

In process-oriented psychology, a life myth is a recurrent pattern in life that manifests from birth to death, or “the basic blueprint behind life’s meandering path” (Diamond & Jones, 2004, p. 147). Deciphering a person’s life myth pattern can be accomplished by unfolding the process within a childhood dream, an early childhood memory, chronic body symptoms, recurring relationship problems, or near death experiences. All of these can provide a glimpse into a person’s life myth, because they all have the force of silence behind them, which is also the force behind the life myth itself (Mindell, 2004).

Identifying and working with your life myth can be a helpful tool as you begin to view your life with greater awareness:

It not only locates personal history in the context of a broader archetypal drama, but also adds a spiritual dimension to self-exploration by addressing questions such as, “Why am I here? What am I meant to learn or do? What is my purpose in life?” Viewing experience as a part of a mythic pattern can relieve feelings of stuckness or failure that often accompany chronic problems. It can also bring reminders of life’s meaning and purpose” (Diamond & Jones, 2004, p. 149).

Tracking and working with my own life myth has been a vital part of my studies and personal growth process. It has offered me invaluable information about the authentic path that my life is seeking, and it has helped me to follow this path with greater

awareness and willingness. Through such explorations, it has become clear to me that my life myth is a journey to integrate the dreaming and sentient natures of my altered state experiences into my everyday consensus reality state, so that I can feel more complete and at home inside my own skin, and out in the world as well. In the pages and sections that follow, I will demonstrate some of the ways that this basic life myth pattern has manifested through various areas, or channels, in my life.

As I mentioned earlier, process-oriented psychology believes that nighttime dreams a person remembers from childhood can provide a glimpse into his or her life myth pattern. According to Mindell (2007):

after working with hundreds of people on their earliest childhood memories and childhood dreams, it seems to me that childhood dreams are examples of personal myths. I found that these dreams predict not only our professional futures, but the kinds of relationships we will have, the nature of our chronic symptoms, and even near death experiences. (p. 82)

Despite their “predictive” nature, childhood dreams are not meant to be interpreted as an inevitable sequence of actual events; rather they are used to decipher a person’s tendencies toward particular life patterns, which together “sum up to an overall glow, your personal myth whose essence is the force of silence” (Mindell, 2004, p. 157).

In my own recurring childhood dream, a mafia gang was chasing after me with guns, and they were trying to shoot me in the head and heart. In an effort to escape them, I ran up to the top of a building, but they followed me there. Soon I was trapped at the edge of the building with nowhere left to go except *up*, so I flew up into the sky. As I gained altitude, I was comforted by the calm blue sky, but, when I returned to the earth,

the mafia was still there waiting for me, trying to kill me all over again. I had to fly into the sky once more to escape them, only to return to earth and find them again, and so on (see, *Childhood Dream*, on p. 85 for a full description).

When I worked on this dream in a session with Arnold Mindell, it became clear how my life myth pattern is symbolically embedded within the dream's imagery. In the dream, my everyday consensus reality self is forced to fly off into a parallel world (the sky) and then land briefly before taking to the sky once again. My circular journey back and forth between earth and sky illustrates my need to learn to live within a flow between the two worlds.

This basic life myth pattern can also be seen in my chronic body symptoms, which sometimes serve the same function as the mafia gang, and this connection between the mafia and my body symptoms was hilariously reinforced by someone who had no knowledge of my dream history with gangsters. Remember how the doctor described my head injury as a gang of berserk dogs running around in my brain with guns, and rapidly shooting off random bullets? My symptoms are a central part of my earthly experience, and they continually threaten to kill off aspects of my little u, consensus reality identity, by regularly forcing me into strong altered states where my big U identity is top dog.

The near death experiences I've had also followed this same basic pattern. Whether death was near because of a big accident, severe illness, or suicidality, the experience always thrust me into an altered state. When I actually did get shot in the head, the experience sent me rocketing away from the earth and towards a transcendent light, and I longed to recreate that experience when I became suicidal. And my earliest childhood memories were of altered state experiences in which I rose up into the sky to

became one with the sky, moonlight, stars and sun. All of these experiences are propelled by the force of silence and contain the same mythic pattern in their background – they all contribute to the unfolding of my life myth and urge me to find my own path of heart.

Following The Path Of Heart

The term *path of heart* comes from the teachings of don Juan and refers to a path that follows the dreaming force in the background of your life.

Don Juan recommends finding and following the path of heart. Any process you follow is just one of many possible paths. . . . Every path is relative, and knowing whether to stay on or to leave your path requires clarity and self-knowledge. Your heart will tell you when it is time to leave a path and when it is time to stay on it. (Mindell, 1993, p. 140)

In process-oriented psychology, finding and following your path of heart is a way of congruently aligning yourself with your life myth; it is a way of using your awareness to consciously move *with* the force of silence instead of unconsciously resisting that force. “The less you are aware of your path, the more you feel lost or pushed around by fate” (Mindell, 2007, p. 91), but “a person can work with a life myth consciously and creatively, instead of being unconsciously propelled by it” (Diamond & Jones, 2004, p. 148). By following the path of heart, you are essentially following the Tao, which is another important theory at the heart of process-oriented psychology.

The Taoist masters taught that aligning oneself to nature (the ‘Tao’) as it changes is the key to a balanced and happy life. . . . Transformation occurs naturally once a person is able to trust nature and go along with what is happening. . . .

Following the flow of process also involves going with what is happening in a given moment, rather than resisting it. . . . It means that when an obstacle or difficulty arises, we face it in order to find out what changes are meant for us in that challenge. (Diamond & Jones, 2004, pp.17-19)

The challenges inherent in my chronic body symptoms, strong altered states, and near death experiences, are all inviting me to follow the flow (or Tao) of the process and to notice the changes trying to take place in my life. “From the perspective of ordinary consciousness, this flow seems unintentional, yet from *its* viewpoint – from the viewpoint of dreaming – it is *intentional* and has a distinct path” (Mindell, 2005, p. 19). To find this distinct path of heart “you must develop your awareness, must become a better observer of what happens inside and outside” (Mindell, 2007, p. 6).

For many years, I tried to resist the steady pull of my life myth in many ways, and so I was not always following my path of heart. It amuses me now to reflect back and see how blind I was to the transformation that was trying to happen, and how futile it was to try and resist my deeper dreaming and life myth process. Eventually, my exhaustion helped me to respect the mythic pull in my life, to devote myself to following that pull with awareness, and to let it unmistakably reveal my path of heart.

The path of heart is simply the path that is “easy”; it is the ancient Tao, but no one can follow this Tao without awareness of what is happening. In those moments when you use your second attention, feel your dreaming body, and find the Tao, you know that you are on track, because whether you are working hard or not, you feel like you are not using any energy. Everything happens of its own accord, and you seem to be riding a wave on the path of least resistance. Though you may

be in the midst of a whirlwind, still it is the path of least action. (Mindell, 1993, p. 141)

As the whirlwind of body symptoms spun through me, my dreaming process kept nudging me closer to my own path of heart as a matter of my very survival, because the only way I could endure my body symptoms was to find the path of least resistance. When I began experimenting with following my own path of least resistance and letting my dreaming flow naturally into my everyday consciousness, I was amazed to find that my stubborn attachment to my former identity loosened its grip on me and my *doing* rhythm relaxed into an easy flow. I was no longer using all of my energy to enforce a staccato series of rules designed to power me through the consensus reality tasks of each day. I moved with the flow of what was trying to happen, and in doing so found my path of heart. I realized that cultivating my ability to exist in consensus reality, without inhibiting my altered states, took significantly less energy than trying to keep these realities separate or trying to obliterate an unwanted reality. When I feel a sense of flow and *ease*, then I know that I am following my path of heart as I go about my daily life.

Integrating Consensus Reality And Altered States

When I began my studies, process-oriented psychology provided me with a language and framework for understanding my various states of awareness. Suddenly, I had a name for three types of awareness that I experience (i.e., consensus reality, dreaming, and essence), and the simple act of naming and identifying these different types of states made me feel less crazy and helped me to better understand myself. The way I understood it was that I could *do* things in the consensus reality world, *be* a

creative and fluid shape-shifter in the dreaming world, and *dissolve* into light particles or into the vast emptiness of space in the essence world. These distinctions of *doing* in consensus reality, *being* in dreaming, and *dissolving* into essence, were my habitual ways of operating and I couldn't even imagine that all three types of states really do jumble up into one spontaneous, overlapping, and unpredictable flow, which is what my life myth is all about; learning to flow between states. I had absolutely no idea how to 'mix it up' and have more fluidity in my life, for instance; I just didn't know how to *be* in consensus reality, *do* my everyday life while in a dreaming state, or *dissolve* into an essence realm and still function in the consensus reality world. I feared that if I was in a dreamy sort of state I would not be able to get anything done, or if I was in an essence state where I felt like I was one with everything, then I would be so detached that I would not be able to relate to people, and if I was in a very linear consensus reality state I would not be able to feel into either of the other two states. So I stubbornly fought for these imaginary boundaries between states, believing that doing, being, and dissolving, each momentarily annihilate one another - until my never-ending internal battles exhausted me (see, *Poison Dream and Tarantula*, in the Journal of Artwork and Poetry section p. 98). But as Mindell (1993) points out, "your spirit makes you uncomfortable as long as you act like others. You try to perform the doings of reality, but something in you grieves and searches for that mysterious thing that makes life worthwhile" (p. 148). I was depressed because I believed that at any given moment I had to choose either a complete identification with the physical world, or a complete detachment from it. Neither one felt satisfying, and I didn't think I could have both simultaneously, but "the big U is not

simply wisdom. Rather, it is a superpositional kind of intelligence that seeks to know itself through the diversity of your parallel worlds” (Mindell, 2007, p. 103).

Fortunately, as my studies progressed, I discovered that I could engage fluidly with my different states, and I learned methods that taught me how to work with these different levels by paying close attention to what is trying to emerge from my inner worlds. Maintaining this level of attention is challenging and requires a moment-to-moment awareness of subtle flickers of thoughts, emotions, or tiny body sensations as they arise from the vast silence of the essence realm and then surface into dreamland and consensus reality realms. When I manage to use this practice to integrate my consensus and nonconsensus reality worlds, a lot of energy that was formerly dedicated to segregating or marginalizing my different states is suddenly freed up. In fact, the more I can let my altered states come forward and exist *with* my consensus reality states, the more relaxed I feel in general. I still look and act like the regular old me, but I’m comfortable and can fluidly interact with virtually any situation that arises, and I have much more fun in the world! From this place, I can naturally hold *everything* and *nothing* simultaneously, and all of my inner conflicts and arguments dissolve. This easy, spacious attitude is the atmosphere from which I want to live my life!

Sometimes the intensity of my most severe chronic pain is the force that spontaneously helps me to integrate my consensus reality and altered state experiences. The pain itself is a part of my consensus reality world, but it also takes me into altered states that reach beyond words, beyond thinking, and into very deep dreaming and essence realms. Connecting to all of these states and realities at once allows me to consciously acknowledge the pain and fatigue without struggling against them, and

simultaneously I can also transcend my identification with any body symptoms, or thoughts about them.

I often am able to experience multiple states of awareness at once in the very early morning hours, when my pain and tiredness often feel unbearable. I like to go outside and gaze at the silhouettes of tall trees growing on the hills surrounding my house, and standing under the quiet night sky, I let myself feel the sharp pounding pain in my head, and I imagine this pain getting so big that it fills my entire backyard with its pure, sharp, pounding, and pulsing energy field. I let myself melt into this energy field until there is no difference between me and the pulsing energy filling my yard. I let myself expand further until the pulsing energy that is me extends to the far hills and encompasses every tree. At this point, my awareness usually gets pulled back into my body, and so I am *also* my head throbbing with pain. *I am both things at once*, and I practice not resisting any part of it. I allow myself to be the huge pulsing energy field, the body that's inside it, and the pain that's inside my body. Then I look up into the sky and expand even further so that my energy field includes the clouds, the moon, the earth, the stars, the galaxy, and the whole universe. I become spiral galaxies, black holes, and the timeless great mystery. *I become all things at once*. I become the pregnant void that holds all things, including my own tiny body and the pain that fills it. I am the nothing that is everything. I am seeing the universe through my big U sentient perspective, which allows me to simultaneously acknowledge my everyday identity and step outside of it. Once I am both everything and nothing, the pain becomes just a little speck of a certain kind of energy somewhere within the huge vastness of a cosmic and mystical space/time

continuum. Within this framework my pain is no longer experienced as a disturbance so I feel well even in the midst of it, and I feel grateful for the gift of a human body.

Because I greatly value the integration of my consensus reality and altered states, I've mostly chosen not to use drugs for pain relief or sleep inducement. Drugs create altered states of their own, which interfere with my ability to choose what kinds of altered states I enter into, and how much time I will spend there. I have learned that much of the pain I experience (either physical or emotional) is a direct result of identifying with being *too small*, and habitually limiting my definition of myself, my awareness, and my appreciation of what's happening in the moment. When I take pain-killing or sleep-inducing drugs, I miss a chance to expand my awareness and get *bigger*, because the drugs significantly diminish my awareness. "What usually influences symptoms the most is *the awareness practice itself* – your access to your own hyperspaces, your expanded sense of reality. Developing moment-to-moment awareness leads you toward an increasingly congruent lifestyle [and] you become more of who you are. (Mindell, 2004, pp. 57-58).

Going into altered states of my own choosing allows me to unfold and expand my own awareness and offers me infinite possibilities. When I do access different levels of consciousness, I want the experience to be a useful, rich, and meaningful destination in itself, not just an escape from the pain. And, on the other hand, there are times when I'm just so exhausted from days and days of intense pain and sleep deprivation that I become suicidal, and drugs are literally a lifesaver at these times. They satisfy my need for sleep, my nervous system calms down, and then any suicidal thoughts disappear. I've come to

accept my occasional drug use, and I no longer see it as a failure on my part but simply as another aspect of my mysterious dreaming path.

My dreaming path also includes regular doses of what I call *waterfall medicine*. Over the years, I've had several altered state experiences involving waterfalls. In each experience, Waterfall showed me that, in order for me to be well in the world, I must pick up the style of falling water and claim my mythic power to flow between different states (see, *Becoming the Waterfall*, in the Journal of Artwork and Poetry section, p. 143). The energy that a waterfall embodies is like medicine to me. It heals my anxiety and inner arguing, and it soothes my entire body as it simultaneously energizes me. I experience this waterfall medicine as a natural ability to keep flowing under any circumstance. Waterfall always takes the path of least resistance; she does not fight other natural forces but instead spontaneously surrenders to gravity and does not waste any energy resisting what is. In fact, Waterfall's earth path is determined by her relationship with what she encounters; she falls freely and then swirls, rushes, trickles, and ripples over, around, and under whatever she meets. Waterfall's spirit has a larger path than what we are able to see on earth because the *big U* path of water is circular: water falls from the sky, then plays on the surface of the earth, then travels underground, then returns to the surface of the earth, and then vaporizes into the atmosphere. Water is amazingly adaptable in its effortless relationship with all it encounters as it flows, evaporates, merges, and falls in its continuous circular journey from sky to earth, and back again.

When I am following my path of heart, my Big U self looks like the power of falling water. I flow this way and that while following my own path of least effort, playing around on the earth while remaining connected to my home in the sky. I'm fluid

and not resisting anything. I'm in relationship with all that is. I flow naturally from earth to sky and then back again, just like I did over and over again in my childhood dream. Waterfall's circular journey is my natural *path of heart* rhythm, and it symbolizes my wholeness and my mythic drive to integrate my consensus reality (earth) states and my altered (sky) states into one fluid and harmonious circular relationship.

Chapter 5: The Project Unfolds

Surrendering To What Is

When I began this research project, I had no idea that it would eventually evolve into a collection of artwork and poetry that would emerge from my altered states and chronic symptoms, to symbolically express my life myth pattern. In fact, I had originally planned (or at least my linear mind had planned) to conduct research on other peoples' altered states, specifically the altered states experienced by people while they are dancing Argentine Tango. I had turned in a detailed research proposal for this topic and had been conducting interviews in the tango community for a full year, when my body symptoms became so large and intrusive that it was impossible for me to continue with the research.

I had just been diagnosed with cancer, and my chronic fatigue during this time became so debilitating that I spent the better part of a year in bed. I really had no choice but to put my former research project on hold, and the members of my study committee suggested I begin an entirely new research project, one that I could do from my sickbed. These wise advisors suggested that I study chronic pain and illness from a personal perspective. They thought that since chronic illness was taking over my life, I might as well focus on it, and they explained how this could be a way for me to develop my awareness, follow my dreaming more closely, and still get a research project done. I was shocked and repulsed by the idea. "No way!" I protested. "That's just too depressing. I don't want to focus on my pain and illness any more than I already have to. Forget it!" They patiently asked me to go home and think about it, but my reaction remained as a resounding "Yuck!" for quite some time. I did not want to explore my dreaming by

focusing on my persistent body symptoms. How infuriating! How boring! How uncreative!

While my little u agonized over whether I should or shouldn't begin a new research project, another part of me had already begun doing it. As a way of journaling, I had been making drawings and poems of my dreams and altered states in an attempt to understand why illness was gripping me so tightly. Then one morning when I was not thinking about my research project at all, I woke up with an urge to look through the two oversize pads of watercolor paper and newsprint paper that I had been using for my artwork journal. I had never reviewed my drawings and poetry before; when I felt a desire to create something, I simply found the next clean page in one of the pads and began, and once I felt finished creating and learning from each new drawing or painting, I closed up that pad of paper until my next creative inspiration arose. This one particular morning was different though; I didn't want to draw or write anything, I was merely curious about what I had been up to for the last year or more.

Honoring my sudden curiosity, I opened up each pad of paper to view my very first drawing, and then systematically looked at each successive page, following the order in which the artwork was created. As I flipped through the two pads of my journal, I was astonished to see that the images I had drawn contained clear, deep, and powerful symbols, which outlined my life myth pattern. Image after image displayed symbols of the mystical and multi-dimensional dreaming process that had emerged from the essence and materialized right onto each page. I cried as I marveled at the mystery of how my dreaming process had so effortlessly revealed itself to me on these pads of paper! I saw that all those months and months of being bedridden had provided me with a perfect

environment for self-reflection and creative expression, and through the resulting series of artwork, I saw who I was at my very core, and who I was trying to become in the world. Seeing my life myth process so clearly and tangibly displayed on pads of newsprint and water color paper was tremendously relieving and enlightening; it confirmed that my troublesome chronic symptoms were meaningful expressions from the dreaming realm and that they had something important to offer.

Sitting with all of this new insight, I began to realize that this journal *was* my new research project: I could focus on my life myth and use my artwork and poetry to illustrate how my mythic patterns surfaced through chronic body symptoms and artistic expression from the dreaming and essence realms (see Chapter 6 on p. 65 to view the artwork journal and read descriptions of each piece). Suddenly my perennial bad mood lifted, as I realized that I had been *doing* my research all along! All that time in bed with nothing much to do except work with my intense pain and sleeplessness had forced me to pay extremely close attention to whatever I was experiencing. This moment-to-moment tracking of my different states of awareness created an atmosphere that allowed my life myth to spontaneously emerge onto pages of paper.

As the individual continues to face challenges and setbacks, it becomes important for her to know that all the interactions along the path of healing are “the healing.” . . . Every encounter reveals the multiple dimensions of the patterns . . . Healing is a continuous process of standing in uncertainty with faith and trust and often the lack of either. It requires surrendering to what is. . . . The darkness surrounding any illness contains a sacred process filled with possibilities. The theory of dissipating structures . . . demonstrates that when a self-organizing

structure breaks down, the possibility for reorganizing at a higher level exists. . . .

All of us are called to be fully whole, holy, enlightened. Illness is one of the paths.

(Dahm, 2006, p. 11)

Seeing that my new research project had been *doing* itself for quite awhile facilitated an important turning point in my emotional and physical health: I began to have faith in the wisdom of whatever was manifesting in the moment. I started to trust and honor my own wacky process more than ever before. I relaxed into the idea that *not doing* was a mysterious way of *doing*, and that it was also a way of *being* on my path of heart. “The path of heart is a fluid path . . . It is the ancient Chinese Way, the Tao. It is water. It is formless and has no plans but flows wherever a passage opens up for it” (Mindell, 1993, p. 143). During my time in bed, waterfall medicine had been magically at work, and I had been following my own path of least effort without even knowing it! In fact, when I was very ill and had to stop conducting my original research, I had a powerful altered state experience in which a waterfall told me, “Yours is the power of falling water.” I told my study committee about the experience, and they insisted that the only way I would be able to successfully complete my studies was to pick up the power of falling water and live with it close to my heart. The truth and urgency of my need to get things done in an effortless manner was undeniable, so I promised my committee members, Caroline, Ingrid, and Stephen, that I would only work on my new research project when it felt effortless. I will be forever grateful to them for eliciting this promise from me, because it paved the way for this body of artwork to slowly emerge over time, and helped me to value the presence of waterfall medicine in my everyday life.

Accessing The Dreaming Through Creativity

Many psychological approaches have recognized creativity and artistic expression as valuable psychological tools, and process-oriented psychology views creative expression as another way of getting close to dreaming and essence levels of awareness. The process oriented model suggests that the source of creativity originates in these nonconsensus reality realms, and that “creativity [does] not belong solely to the realm of materials or art or music but to the whole of life itself” (p. xxi). From this viewpoint, “creativity is always there – waiting for you to notice [it] at any moment in the ‘almost nothing’ that catches your attention. If you stay close to this murky and magical moment, you will discover the beginning of new and creative worlds” (Mindell, 2005, p. 6).

What Mindell refers to as “the almost nothing that catches your attention” is also known as a *sentient flirt*.

Flirts are the first way in which the Essence world arises in our awareness
 Flirts are quick, evanescent, nonverbal sensations, visual flickers, moods, and hunches that suddenly catch our attention. . . . Flirt-like experiences are of such brief duration that we normally do not stay with them long enough to help them unfold and come into consciousness. They are fleeting and non-consensual. The moment we notice a Flirt that has captured our attention, we have caught the tail of a creative process in the midst of unfolding. (Mindell, 2005, pp. 23-24)

Creatively working with a flirt means noticing something that draws your attention and then unfolding what interests you about it.

Flirts come in many forms (actually, they can come in *any* form) and can be terrific food for creativity. Every time something flirts with you – every time something suddenly catches your attention – whether it is a leaf blowing gently in the wind or the sound of spinning wheels of a car, it is a seed that has a life force within it, an Intentional Field beginning to bloom. (Mindell, 2005, p. 55)

When I began creating in my artwork journal, I would frequently stop to notice what was flirting with me deep in my inner landscapes. These flirts contained an essence or sentient energy that informed my dreaming process, and then made its way onto the page through my spontaneous artistic expression. “Developing a sense of personal myth or dreaming may be related to noticing emerging tendencies in creative expression.” (Kavanaugh, 2007, p. 17). By working with flirts and allowing my essence and dreaming levels to take form in imagery, I ended up with twenty-five pieces of artwork and ten poems that depict my life myth patterns. Studying my creative work over time, I have seen a definite recurring pattern in the artwork: I need to go *way up* or *way down* in order to enter into the emptiness or the void, where I am both *nothing* and *everything* simultaneously. This state of emptiness is frequently symbolized in my artwork and poetry as the sky, vast universes, black holes, the center of the earth, deep tree roots, or waterfalls. These recurrent symbols, patterns, and story lines are visible tokens of the existence of a non-visible world full of deep feelings and subtle wisdoms. Because “the Essence is almost inexpressible . . . it can be helpful to attempt to express it in the form of brief drawings, poetry, gestures, and musical phrases” (Mindell, 2005, p. 37).

Of course, at the time that I was creating the artwork, I didn’t know my drawings and poetry were illustrating my life myth, but it came right through me and onto paper

nonetheless. When I was sick in bed, the journal was primarily a way for me to nurture my awareness and develop an understanding of all my parts and states of mind. Creative expression has been a powerful, often mystical communication tool for me, because it enables me to bridge the worlds of consensus reality and non-consensus reality by expressing and sharing experiences that I do not have words for. Artwork and poetry help me to explore intangible worlds and express subtle but deeply meaningful internal experiences that would otherwise escape translation into everyday language and concepts.

Art becomes the embodiment, or the interweaving, of a dynamic relationship between the inner and outer, the world of spirit and the physical. In cultures where art is central, such as in Bali, we find that there is no word for art because there is no separation between art and life. . . . Viewing artwork as a dream, we are like lucid dreamers consciously interacting with possibilities in the deep play of life, beneath the veneer of the external world is the play of reality, the play of dreams. (Davis, 2004, pp. 11-12)

My Creative Process

Although I use the term *artwork* to describe the body of work I created, I only use the word loosely as I don't consider myself to be an artist per se, and I have never been trained as such. My pieces are simple, spontaneous expressions of my deepest experiences, usually made quickly and without any preconceived idea of the end result. I decided to refer to my drawings, paintings, collages, and sculptures as artwork because I use art materials to express myself creatively, and because I lack a more appropriate term

for what results at the end of the process. By defining it in this way, the creation of artwork is something that is accessible to most everyone, regardless of training, experience, natural propensity, or varying physical or cognitive abilities.

When I was creating the journal, I often turned to it late at night or in the early morning hours when I was wrestling with a major edge such as intense pain, or lack of sleep, or when I was facing a big fear. I never really sat down and tried to create artwork or poetry; it just sort of happened *to* or *through* me as I followed a moment of inspiration. For me, allowing the dreaming to come through me and out onto a piece of paper is a process of becoming *empty*. I invite the mystery to fill the empty space inside of me as well as the empty space on the paper. “In a way, every life, every project has its own mind. When you are in touch with the mind’s direction, you don’t really do things; rather you are a kind of paintbrush the big U uses to paint with” (Mindell, 2007, p. 110). When I was journaling in this way, I never knew what was going to appear, and the practice of being open to whatever surfaced was freeing and healing in itself. The process almost always put me into an altered state, and I would become so absorbed in what was happening that I totally lost my sense of time passing as I became immersed in the feeling of *emptiness* and effortless *not-doing*.

Sometimes, I would be on my way to bed when I suddenly felt compelled to draw or write something. I didn’t have any notion of what was trying to come through me, I just plopped myself down on the bed or floor, noticed flirts, and waited to see what would happen next. I would enter into a quiet space free of thoughts or expectations, and from that emptiness an image or poem would emerge. When I was drawing, the image would usually start in the center of the paper and then developed outward from there. When I

was writing, the words would sometimes just float down from the sky, fall into my head, and then unfold onto the paper. I learned to honor my own creative way of becoming empty, noticing flirts, and letting the artwork flow through me onto the page. This practice provided me with a great deal of insight into my own psychology and also revealed ways that I gain meaning from life.

I created most of the artwork and poetry in the journal very quickly. Within five to fifteen minutes I usually finished the drawing, painting, collage, or poem that was emerging. A few of the more complexly layered or detailed artworks (see *Life Myth Mandala*, p. 155, *Birthday*, p. 76, and *Support from the Orchids*, p. 139, in the Journal of Artwork and Poetry section) took several hours to complete. Sometimes, while working on a piece, my inner critic would surface and forcefully try to maintain the status quo, which did not include this type of expression. My inner critic diligently guards the boundary of my known world, and this more rigid part of me often feels threatened when I leap helter-skelter over major life edges in the midst of some form of creative abandon.

Remember that you may get to an edge as you follow your own process; that is, an impasse that emerges when you have not allowed an experience to complete itself fully. . . . When we come to the edge, we may feel lost, or our minds may begin to drift off and become unfocused, or a critical voice may interrupt what we are doing. (Mindell, 2005, p. 226)

When my critic arrived in the midst of a creative process, I tried to remember that it is simply one more wacky part of me wanting expression, and that its presence may even add something important to the artwork being created, so I made space for this critical voice too, and let it have expression on the page (see, *Jumping Out of My Story*, p. 126;

Mafia Death Squad Chant, p. 88; and *My Big U Tells a Story*, p. 148 in the Journal of Artwork and Poetry section).

I must admit that many of my critics have also been the source of some of my most inventive and zany creations. Just think of all the power they have *over you* and what you could do if you could cull that energy and use it as a creative rocket to boost you into further dimensions of the imagination. (Mindell, 2005, p. 201)

Including my critic in the process allowed me to get an even wider look at the forces within my creativity, and it helped me to appreciate the special kind of sharp awareness that my critic can offer.

After completing a work in the journal, I would take time to sit in front of it and open myself up to whatever it had to teach me. I tried to stay empty of judgment or analysis and just allow the completed poem or artwork to inform me from its special worldview, unique insights, or particular powers. This type of exploration enabled me to understand how my altered state experiences “trickle up” and transform into my everyday consensus reality experiences. Sometimes, after I made a drawing I would want to get to know its dreamfigures more fully, so I would use my imagination to animate the images and figures and let them move around and interact in my mind’s eye. These animations taught me a lot about how my various parts were relating to one another, and I sometimes incorporated aspects of these lively interactions into my newly finished artworks or poems. Sometimes, I even created entirely new pieces of work based on the dialogue between my different parts (see *Being Versus Doing*, p. 121 and *The Veil – Lifted*, p. 131 in the Journal of Artwork and Poetry section).

The guidance and wisdom that my consensus reality mind was able to receive from the dreaming and essence level realms, just by sitting with a finished piece of work, was often a profound experience. These precious bits of insight showed me how I am really just one whole being, and how the imaginary boundaries between my consensus and nonconsensus worlds really only exist in my mind. The artwork showed me that the worlds are fluid and inseparable; one reality informs the other in an ongoing and seamless flow. When I am able to deeply connect with this *wholeness*, then everything in me gets bigger, life makes more sense, and waterfall medicine flows easily through every aspect of my life.

Presenting This Project To The World

All my life I have been shy to draw attention to myself for fear that my altered state experiences would somehow be exposed and judged. So why would I ever decide to publicly display my artwork, stand up in front of a large group of people, and reveal my most private inner self when I've spent a lifetime trying to hide it? Well, one important reason is that I want to help diminish the social stigma that still accompanies altered states and chronic illness, and the only way I know how to achieve that goal is for more and more people to share their experiences publicly. But the honest and edgy truth behind the main reason that I ended up displaying my artwork, reading my poems, and talking about my altered states in a public setting was that I woke up one night and heard *the voice* emphatically telling me that I had to give a presentation. I have never gone against the advice of this particular voice, and it had been with me since my earliest childhood memories. I've come to think of *the voice* as the wizened voice of my great-grandmother,

who was a strong, wise, and compassionate Cherokee woman who died before I was even born. I rarely mention the voice to anyone because I'm afraid people won't understand and will think I'm crazy, and also because my experience of the voice is so incredibly intimate that I wouldn't know how to accurately describe my relationship with it.

I trust this voice unequivocally, and when it told me that I had to present my work to the world, I knew that I had to follow this instruction. However, the voice did nothing to help me deal with the terror that followed in the wake of my decision. For many days, I lived in a state of shock and panic as I realized I would have to expose my deepest self to an audience of people. I was unable to eat or speak, and walked around in a frightened state of numbness. My heart raced every time I thought of the presentation, so I tried really hard not to think about it. After this initial shock began to subside, I allowed myself to feel into how important this presentation would be for my personal-growth, and I told myself that my spiritual development was more important than my desire to avoid public disgrace and humiliation. I reminded myself of how my life-long habit of hiding my own process had contributed to my suffering by adding loneliness and isolation to the mix of stressors in my life, and I persuaded myself that "going public" would help me to break free of my secret shame and strengthen my on-going healing process.

While all of these arguments in favor of the presentation were persuasive and theoretically helpful, the prospect of the actual event still made me run for the nearest bathroom every time I thought of it! I wasn't sure that I could actually go through with it, and I wasn't able to focus on preparing for the presentation because the mere thought of it put me into a frozen, panicked state of mind. Thankfully, a friend suggested I send out a

last minute email invitation letting people know that I was providing food and drink, which helped me focus on *feeding* people instead of *speaking* in front of them.

Finally, on the day of the presentation, it became obvious that my linear, doing-oriented mind was not going to be able to pull this off, and that I was going to have to find a way of *being* with the presentation instead of *doing* the presentation. No matter how hard I tried, I simply couldn't find a way to prepare for this event in a linear way, and, even though the presentation was only a few hours away, I still didn't know what I was going to say or do. As I drove to the Process Work Institute, I had fantasies of corralling someone in the parking lot and just asking them matter-of-factly, to go into the building and say to everyone, "Please enjoy looking at the artwork, there will be no presentation, and thank you for coming."

Of course, the inevitable finally arrived. The food table was set up, people were wandering around looking at my artwork, and then they were sitting around waiting for my talk to begin. "Yikes! What do I do now? People are expecting me to *do* something!" My body was shaking and my mind was blank. The only thing I could think to do was run out of the building and drive far, far away, but I ran into the bathroom instead! I considered locking myself in there forever, but then something bigger than my traumatized "little u" self took over, and, like a zombie, I managed to leave the bathroom, stand up in front of an audience of more than fifty people, and begin speaking. I knew I was speaking and could feel the words forming in my mouth, but I couldn't actually hear what I was saying and I was unsure of the content. After presenting the first few pieces of artwork and poetry, I was able to enter into the world of each piece and speak about it from the perspective of its own unique altered state experience, so then I relaxed. I had

found my flow: I was in an altered state *and* I was functioning in the everyday world, wow! Right in front of all of those people, I somehow managed to embody waterfall medicine and integrate my consensus and altered states into one big flow! This weird experience went on for two hours, and I was surprised that the feedback I got at the end of the presentation was positive, people liked it! I had gone over a lifelong edge, and it brought me closer to living my life myth congruently, and I felt closer to my community.

After finishing the presentation, the next component of the project that needed attention was the essay. Knowing that other people would be reading this essay made it difficult for me to write at times. Unlike the presentation, which had a clearly scheduled beginning and ending, I knew that the essay would linger in the public realm for a lot longer. Its “permanence” was intimidating and made it difficult for me to choose what to make public and what to keep private. An essay of this length and nature felt especially exposing because it dives so deeply into the *details* of my life and thoughts. As much as I enjoy the process of writing, there were numerous times during the creation of this essay that I struggled deeply with the content. When I wrote about things I had previously kept private, my old fears would come flooding to the surface and my inner critic would seize the moment. Sometimes, my critic attacked my writing so fiercely that I became hypnotized and then paralyzed by my own self-hatred and self-doubt. I deleted page after page as my critic forcefully insisted that certain topics were absolutely forbidden to mention, while others were simply useless. No topic animated my critic’s wrath with more frequency or intensity than when I wrote about the litany of my diagnoses and chronic symptoms. My inner critic zeroed in on the shame I feel about the degree to which physical symptoms have governed my daily life, and I had to take a long and

painful look at parts of myself that I most fear, feel repulsed by, and had spent years avoiding. It warned me not to expose my “flaws” and “weaknesses” for public scrutiny. “You’ll sound like a boring, complaining victim!” it proclaimed. “And besides, no wants to hear about your stupid experiences or discoveries! Just delete it all before anyone sees it!” As a result of this relentlessly demeaning inner voice, I deleted and completely rewrote the chapter describing my medical conditions on three separate occasions over the course of a year.

What finally enabled me to include the chapter on my physical symptoms was letting a diversity of voices from my various inner realms come forward and debate with the critic. Letting other voices in provided me with multiple views on the topic and stopped my self-criticisms from completely dominating my thinking. When my critic forbade me to go public with my chronic pain, the social activist part of me countered by saying, “It could be important to outline my personal chronic symptoms as a way to help de-mystify chronic pain and traumatic brain injuries for those who have never experienced them personally.” Another part of me, the curious, humanistic learner, felt dedicated to telling the whole story and not leaving out the consensus reality details of the symptoms. The self-growth advocate part of me liked the idea of stretching my old tired boundaries and said, “Go for it, this is the best way to get over those out-dated edges!” Some parts of me actually agreed with the critic and felt that the chapter posed valid dangers that should be considered. For instance, the traumatized part of me felt vulnerable and exhausted, and it just couldn’t imagine having to cope with people in my community reading the chapter and forming unfavorable opinions of me. The presence of these distinctly different inner voices provided me with an opportunity to view the

chapter (and myself) from diverse angles, which finally helped me to decide to include it in the final draft. It became clear to me that choosing to omit the chapter on my body symptoms was akin to deleting one of my inner voices, or dismissing a part of my process, and rather than censor or marginalize parts of myself, I chose to value and make room for all of my diverse parts.

Writing this essay for a public audience was almost as scary as doing the public presentation, but both experiences were also incredibly freeing! When my story is displayed in public, then it's no longer my secret - others may hate it, love it, reject it, ignore it, or resonate with it; but however people react - it is no longer *just* mine.

With courage and discipline, you notice that you are a secondary process for the whole community. It is not you alone who wants to change, but a cultural path that wants to change. Your changes may therefore somehow be right for everyone else. Mindell, 1993, p. 142

Joseph Campbell (1998) said that dreams are personal myths and myths are public dreams. I no longer want to carry the weight of my myth as if it is mine alone. I want to offer it up as a public dream! And in many ways my story *is* a public one: we all have a life myth and our own path of heart that is trying to be lived more consciously, we all have symptoms and conflicting inner worlds that fight with us as we struggle to understand and relax into our authentic selves, and we are all far bigger than our little human identities would have us believe.

Chapter 6: The Journal Of Artwork And Poetry**Birthday Dream (Front View)**

January 1997 (22 x 23 inches. Ceramic - combination of high and low fired clay, beads

Birthday Dream (Back View)

January 1997 (22 x 23 inches. Ceramic - combination of high and low fired clay, beads

Even though I created this sculpture in January of 1997, I've included it because it shows how many of the recurring images and shapes in my recent artwork have been with me for a long time. On the morning of my 40th birthday, I woke up from a vivid dream. I lay in bed for quite awhile just enjoying the details of the dream and then decided to give myself a birthday present: I would take the day off from my usual work of creating pottery for other people and go out to my studio and make something just for *me*. I decided to re-create the image in my birthday dream just for the pure joy of spending more time *literally* feeling into this image, and I spent the whole day making it.

This sculpture contains many of the same symbolic elements that my current drawings and collages have. For example, the body position of the *Birthday Dream* woman is similar to that of the woman in *Birthing Universes*. The branches which hold the stars, and the roots which hold the leaf are similar to the twisted roots and branches that appear in many of my recent drawings. The stars she holds up above her head and the counterpart of the starfish in the ocean below are echoed in the painting, *Life Myth Mandala*. When I first created this sculpture, a ceramic heart with wings was perched on top of the highest star, but when my kids were teenagers their frequent roughhousing resulted in the sculpture getting bumped around regularly, and the wings on the heart kept breaking off. I glued the wings back on several times, but then the entire heart broke off of the sculpture and I gave up trying to repair it. When I think of this heart with broken wings in conjunction with my drawing of *Broken Wing – Heart In Jail*, I find it interesting that although I didn't intend to create a sculpture of a heart with broken wings, I had ended up with one nonetheless.

Near the end of this project, as I looked back on my entire body of artwork for the first time and saw *Broken Wing – Heart in Jail*, I suddenly remembered the winged heart that used to sit on top of my sculpture. I had no idea what had happened to it over the years, but a few months later, I came upon it in the very back of the kitchen junk drawer, where it had been imprisoned for who knows how long. Holding the heart and broken wings in the palm of my hand, I was amazed at how different layers of the same themes arise in my life over and over again, both consciously and unconsciously. This rhythm and repetition of images, stories, and themes is the life myth journey embodied throughout my life, unfolding from birth until death.

As I reflect on this series of twenty-five creative pieces, it becomes increasingly clear to me that my personal pattern of *loosing my wings and heart* is symbolic of loosing my way on my path of heart.

Broken Wing - Heart In Jail

January 2004 (18 x 24 inches. Colored pencil on newsprint)

I made this piece while I was taking a day-long class at the Process Work Institute. I had to leave class for an hour and go to a therapy appointment, and, when I returned to class everyone was at the tail end of an exercise that involved drawing an essence experience. Although I had missed much of the exercise, I took some paper and waited to see what would come out. This five-minute drawing was the result, and even though I wasn't sure what the drawing was about at the time, I did know its title. I also knew that this drawing was somehow important for me, so I tacked it up on my office wall, and over the course of a couple weeks I understood that it depicted a deep wound I had carried with me into this life. Now, years later, I can see that the imagery in this drawing depicts a core part of my life myth; my struggle to be freely myself in both consensus reality and altered state experiences, and not feel imprisoned by any one state.

Creation: Nothing Into Everything



January 2004 (27 x 42 inches. Tempera paint on brown butcher paper)

In The Beginning

In the beginning ... there is nothing
In the end ... there is nothing
In the middle ... we make something ... out of nothing

In the beginning ... there is nothing
In the end ... there is nothing
In between we create some thing ... out of no thing

Nothing
Into
Nothing

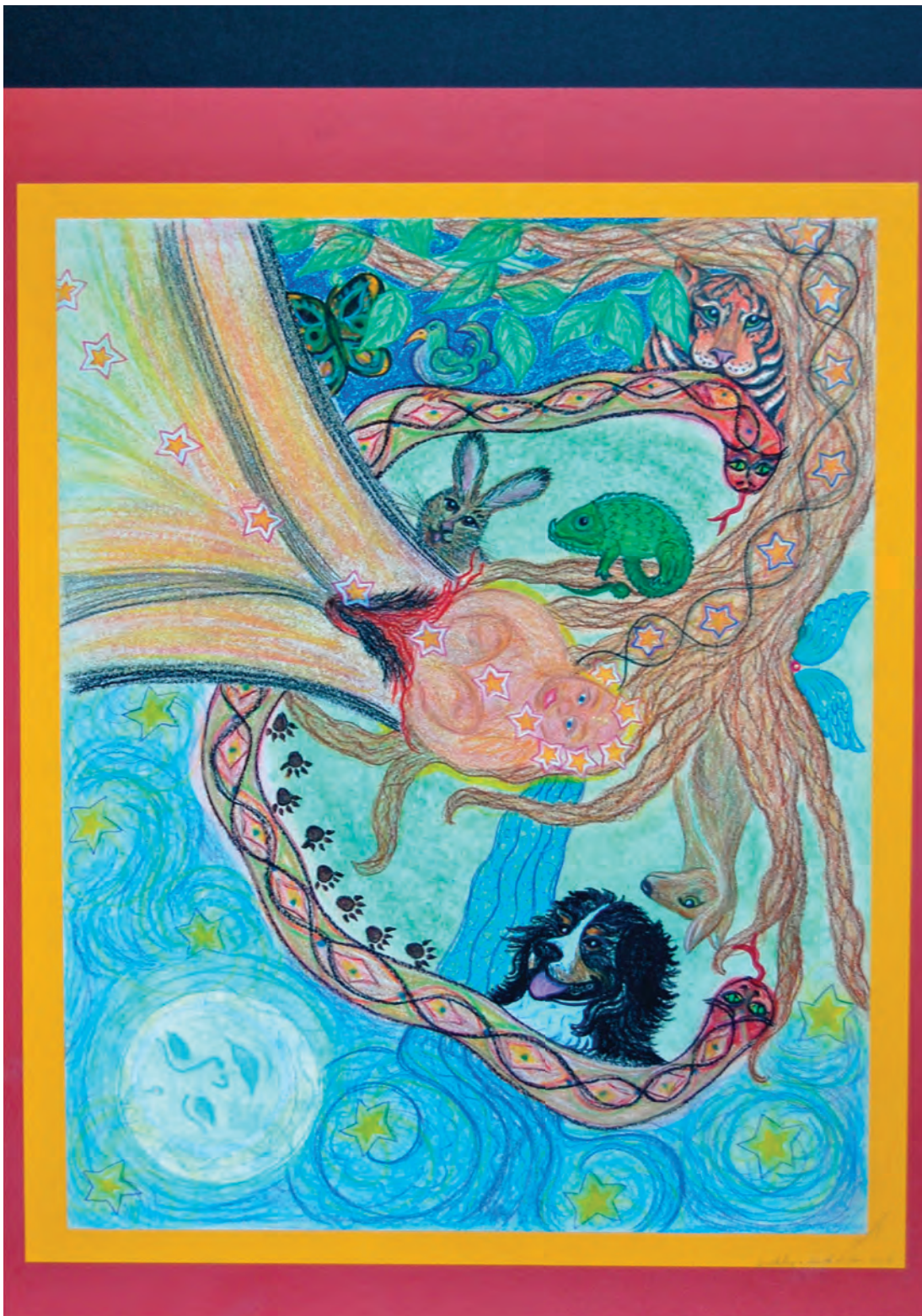
The serpent bites its tail
And swallows itself

Whole

During my first year as a Process Work student, I took a five-week long Intensive course. It was an immersion course, and all day long a group of us learned and practiced together with a variety of teachers. The course was a very enriching and *intense* experience for me! Once a week, we painted for an hour and a half. Our instructor gave us big bulky brushes and huge pieces of thick brown paper, and we spread out on the floor and made space for something to come through us. I loved this process as it mirrors my natural way of creating, but the part I didn't love (at first) was that each week we had to paint over what we'd done the week before! This was hard for me because I either didn't want to say goodbye to my previous week's creation, or else I wanted to begin anew with the freshness of a blank piece of paper, but by the third week, I was beginning to appreciate the layered richness of my increasingly thickly coated paper.

Although the large brushes made it impossible for me to create the kind of detail that wanted to emerge, the *process* of the painting itself became all-engaging. This painting is of the universe creating itself; the light is being born out of the void and swirling energy particles manifest into sharp movements and finally into forms. It is an image showing how nothing creates everything!

Birthday



January 2005 (18 x 24 inches. Oil pastel and chalk on newsprint)

It was my birthday again, and I spent several hours that morning just following my deep dreaming tendencies. I was drawn to make a picture, so I started in the center of the page and drew an egg shape. Hmmmm, what was *this* going to be? As I continued to work on it, the egg turned into my head, and my head was being born – I was emerging from the world of light particles into the world of duality.

In the upper half of this drawing, there are many symbols from recent nighttime dreams, including the tiger, which was a central figure in an especially powerful dream. When I made this picture, the lower half of the drawing was more mysterious to me. This was the first time that a waterfall had ever appeared, and I had not yet heard Waterfall speak to me. In the lower half is my beloved dog, Zorro, who had died many years before, and an upside down deer emerging from the tree roots. Both Zorro and the deer have been big teachers for me in the area of bridging life and death. The two-headed snake surrounds it all, and I wasn't sure what that meant except that the snake seemed to bridge the underworld of spirit and the upper world of consensus reality in the drawing. The snake was holding me inside a protective circle, just as the two-headed dragon would later encircle my life myth mandala!

The drawing also contains many themes that would later repeat, unfold and deepen through my artwork, including the themes of the full moon, stars, wings, tree roots, and bear tracks. The bear tracks are especially interesting to me, as the tracks in this piece were added at the end, almost as an afterthought. For some reason, they just needed to be there. For many years, I asked myself, "Why not the whole bear? Why only the tracks? And why in the lower half of the drawing?" Now I understand that my bear nature was not manifesting in the consensus reality world yet. The tracks were a sign that

the spirit of the bear was approaching, and it would eventually make itself known through the power of falling water (hence the waterfall drawn next to the bear tracks). In fact, the name StarBear came to me in the midst of a strong falling water experience; while I was trying to drive in a torrential rainstorm! I love how this Birthday picture is a foretelling of much of the artwork to come.

One symbol that repeats in various forms throughout my series of artwork is two sets of lines, which crisscross one another in zigzag formation. I have often drawn this pattern on the body of a snake or a dragon, and in my mandala it is symbolized as golden threads that rise up from the void through the center of the mandala and into my heart (I think of my heart as the place where earth and sky meet). This crisscrossing line pattern reminds me of DNA spirals, and also of the lines the snake makes as it rises up the caduceus staff. I recently came across a description of the caduceus and its association with healing while thumbing through one of Arny Mindell's books:

An important symbol of healing is the caduceus, the staff often associated with Aesculapius, the ancient Roman and Greek god of healing. Often identified in mythology as Hermes' staff, the Caduceus is a staff around which one or two brown nonvenomous snakes are entwined. Often at the top there is a pair of wings...among other things, the caduceus symbolizes your deepest self, of the big U reflecting on itself and making itself conscious in everyday reality. This corresponds to the subtle and ineffable experience of the big U. You feel well regardless of the mess you are in. (Mindell, 2007, p. 141)

Perhaps this symbol in my artwork is pointing to the lesson I most want to learn in life: I want to be capable of feeling well regardless of the mess (or state) I'm in!

Process Work Dream

February 2005 (20 x 25 inches. Crayon, oil pastel, acrylic paint, collage on poster board)

When I applied for entrance to the diploma program at the Process Work Institute in March of 2000, students were required have an interview with two diplomats from the school. I had been told that during the interview I would be asked to talk about a recent dream I'd had which supported my desire to become a student of process-oriented psychology. I was so afraid that I wouldn't have a process-oriented dream by the time my interview took place, and I worried that the lack of such a dream would preclude me from entering the program. I rarely have nighttime dreams, or perhaps I just rarely remember them, so in the couple of weeks leading up to my interview I tried to prime myself for dreaming before going to bed each night. I asked all seen and unseen helpers for assistance, but every morning I woke up with no recollection of a dream from the night before! Finally I had reached the eleventh hour; it was the night before my interview and, with nary a dream in my pocket, I prayed for help: "Please send me a dream, anything will do." That night I did have dream, and when I remembered it the next morning I woke up feeling very grateful!

My process-oriented dream was about driving two hours from my little country farm to the Process Work Institute in the "big city" of Portland. I was going there to have my interview and to tell my dream, and as I neared Portland, I could see that there was a lot of traffic on the roads. In fact, I got caught in a huge traffic jam on the highway and was barely crawling along bumper-to-bumper with hundreds of other motorists. After half an hour of being stuck in traffic, I just couldn't stand it any longer; I felt irritated and anxious. I needed to get off the freeway and out of the noxious cloud of car exhaust, and I needed to find another way to get to the Process Work Institute or I would miss my interview. I didn't know my way around the city at all, but I impulsively took the next

off-ramp that came up. I was the only car on that quiet and peaceful little off-ramp road, and I immediately felt relieved, but then the off-ramp curved up and around, suddenly rose steeply up into the sky, and then abruptly ended! I nearly drove right off the end of the road but was able to stop my car at the very edge, just in time. I got out of my car in disbelief and looked over the edge of this road that was somehow floating high up in the sky. I could see for miles up there. I saw the terrible citywide traffic jam and how the roads were laid out all over Portland, and I saw beyond Portland too, into the hills surrounding the city, and my gaze relaxed as I focused on the trees and rolling hills way off in the countryside. I noticed that the sky was becoming golden and pink along the horizon as the sun was setting, and I felt happy because sunset is my favorite time of day. I took a deep breath and forgot about everything. I enjoyed the sunset for a while. Then I looked at the roads below me and found one that would take me out of the tangle of congested inner-city highways and up to a sweet country road. I identified little back roads through nature that would get me to the Process Work Institute, and I felt a sense of liberation in finding my own best way to get there. I started to get back into my car when all of a sudden a sports car zoomed up the same off-ramp and nearly drove right off the end of the road. It screeched to a stop right next to me, and a very angry man got out of the car and started yelling at me, "I followed you because I thought you knew the way!" he screamed. "You almost got me killed!"

"It's OK," I said calmly. "I did the same thing. But look! From up here you can see everything, and I'll help you figure out how to get where you want to go." We stood together and looked down at the cityscape as he planned what route would be best for him to take, then he just got into his little sports car, turned around, and sped back down

the off-ramp toward the freeway. I also prepared to leave, but my car was not as compact as the sports car, and it was impossible to turn it around on the narrow road. I had to carefully and slowly drive my car all the way back down the curvy off-ramp in reverse! I was afraid that if I made a mistake I would slide clear off the edge of this weird road suspended in space, and this is where my dream ended.

Creating this piece of artwork helped me to see how my process work entry dream contained the road map for staying on my path of heart. Like my childhood Mafia dream, this dream demonstrated my need to rise up into the sky in order to feel calm and be able to see my own best direction in the everyday world. The dream even suggested that I would be able to help other people discover their own paths of heart, once I had found my own way. For me, pursuing a process-oriented psychology degree would mean learning how to find my own unique path of least effort, which follows nature and sometimes moves forward in what appears to be a backward sort of way.

First Memory

Spring 2005 (18 x 25 inches. Acrylic paint, oil pastel, and collage on watercolor paper)

Gift

Once,
 in a time
 without time,
 between the ahh and the ha –
 a child of light came into being.
 Ahh – Ha!
 Her body was made entirely of light
 and emptiness. She danced
 through space in spirals,
 birthing galaxies
 with the wave of an arm. And
 she remembered who she was;
 nothing
 and everything.
 Nothing into everything and
 everything into nothing. Nothing
 into
 no thing.
 She spun and twirled and spiraled
 Forever ...
 until the earth winked at her
 from far below.
 “How beautiful!”
 And just as she thought this,
 the earth entered her heart
 and cozied right in. The star-child stopped
 in wonder, and as the earth entered her –
 she entered the earth - so she was born
 into this world of duality. Solid –
 not solid, seen – unseen, earth –
 sky, spirit, matter. It was very disorienting;
 body – no body, time – no time, here –
 not here. It was challenging.
 It was interesting.
 It was fun – not fun.
 It was lonely. It was temporary.
 It was too hard.
 It was a precious gift;
 a love affair. Stay – don’t stay.
 Fly away –
 come back. How to BE
 in a land of duality?
 Free – not free.
 Me – not me.

My very first memory is of the full moon greeting me through my bedroom window. I was about nine months old (judging by the house we were living in) and after being tucked into bed for the night I remember looking at the light and shadow of the moonlight streaming in through the bars of my crib (the photo of the baby in the crib is a photo of me at nine months old). I loved seeing the moonbeams, and at the same time they reminded me of how uncomfortable it was to be restrained by a physical body. The moonlight beckoned, and I could see individual light particles dancing all around me, so I gleefully let myself vaporize into particles of light, and I joined the moonbeams. I rose out of my too-tight skin and my tiny human body, drifted out the window and into the sky, and floated upward along the moonbeams while mingling with other particles of light. My awareness expanded until I filled the entire sky, and it felt wonderful to be back *home* with the moon and the stars! From up there, I could see my house and look right through the roof, so I lovingly watched my mom puttering in the kitchen and then sit down to sew in her special chair in the living room. It seemed like I spent most of the night as part of the sky, before I finally had to re-enter my body and be a baby again. It also seemed like I did this nearly every night, and I remember it as my regular routine: go to bed, see the moon come in to greet me, vaporize into light particles, and become one with the night sky.

When I made this piece of artwork, I decided to risk telling my mom about my earliest memory. I felt so embarrassed to admit that I thought this actually happened to me, *and* on a nightly basis, but I found the courage to tell her about it anyway. I decided it would be interesting to draw the floor plan of our house as I remembered it from my vantage point up in the sky, and then show my mom the drawing to see if it was correct.

We had moved from this house before I was even a year old, so it was unlikely I would have actually remembered how the house was laid out, but when I showed my mom the drawing and described my memory, she said that every detail was correct, including what she tended to do in the evenings after putting me to bed. I told her that one aspect of the experience still puzzled me: how could this have been a nightly occurrence if the moon was always full when it shined into my window and danced in through the bars of my crib? She smiled and explained that right outside of our house was a porch light that shined directly into my bedroom window!

This picture of my first memory is now hanging on the stairway landing inside of my house, and next to it I have mounted an exterior porch light. This porch light illuminates my picture as it also provides light for the stairs and it reminds me that even when consensus reality details seem quite mundane, the magical world of dreaming will have its own way. I drew the floor plan to “prove” that I mingled nightly with moonbeams, but it doesn’t really matter whether it was the moon, or the porch light, that faithfully and playfully entered in through my bedroom window – either way, the light regularly escorted me into the night sky and my home in the stars!

Childhood Dream



Spring 2004-Spring 2005 (21 x 28 inches. Watercolor and collage on watercolor paper)

Mafia Death Squad Chant

We'll kill you for living like the rest:
It's a test -
Earth has no place for you to rest.
For you – sky is best.
We'll put you to the test:
Push you from your nest -
Guns
Pointed at your chest.
There's no rules - and that's no jest!
Fly or die. Pass the test -
And in emptiness
You'll rest.

As a young child I had a recurring nightmare: the Mafia was chasing me through a big, scary brick building. I ran up a spiral staircase to try and get away, but they followed right behind me, up and up many flights of stairs. I finally reached the top of the building and kept running until I came to the edge of the rooftop. I looked behind me and saw the angry mob advancing with their guns pointed straight at me, and more gangsters were appearing on nearby rooftops, and hanging out of windows. Every single *bad guy* had their sights aimed right at my heart and my head – the Mafia was ready to blow me away! Frantically, I looked down over the edge of the high roof; I could jump off but it was about ten stories to the street, and I would surely die from the fall. I looked back at the men running toward me with their guns about to fire, and then I looked up at the sky – my only option for staying alive was to fly!

Quickly and with considerable effort, I managed to get myself airborne by doing the breaststroke; I swam steadfastly up into the sky! The fuming mobsters below fired steadily into the air, and I could hear their bullets whizzing by all around me. I kept fly-swimming higher and higher until I was beyond the range of their guns. Suddenly, the sky turned a gorgeous shade of blue and flying got easier because I no longer needed to rush or push myself to gain altitude. It was so peaceful, still, and quiet up in the sky, but after a while I got tired of fly-swimming, and figured it was time for me to descend back to earth.

I flew down to the roof of a sky scraper miles away from the one I was previously on and assumed that I had left the Mafia far behind, but as soon as I landed I could see them in the street just below me! They had been running through the streets tracking me as I flew, and now the entire mob was mounting the stairs to come and get me! I only had

a few minutes to rest and catch my breath on this rooftop before the shooting scenario began anew, and soon I was flying-swimming through the sky again. Just like the first time; it was really beautiful up there, and I loved seeing the panoramic landscape far below me. Then I saw that the Mafia gang was chasing me through the streets again, and this time I knew I would have to outsmart them because I needed to land and get some rest. I approached the backside of a building and carefully flew onto the ledge of an upper-story window. I crouched there on the narrow brick windowsill, quietly catching my breath, but within a few moments the mob burst into the adjoining room and started shooting at my window ledge. After barely dodging their latest spray of bullets, I was peacefully flying high again. Time after time, I would wake up from this nightmare all sweaty, with my heart rapidly pounding, and fearing for my life. I started having this dream when I was five years old, and I think I continued having it until I was around ten years old. I still remember it vividly, and it still evokes the same range of feelings in me.

When I created this piece of artwork, I started by making the bright blue sky. It was so fun and easy to paint; as I applied fluid brush strokes of watercolor paint I felt just like I was flying or swimming across the paper. Next, I looked long and hard for magazine photos that would enable me to piece together a dream-like landscape that had the feeling of downtown Chicago, which is where my dream took place. Finding appropriate photo fragments took a few months of casual searching. When I was finally done assembling the backdrop, I found a photo of myself at five years old (the same age I was when I first had this dream), and I added it to the sky. Then it was time to add the Mafia, but I was stumped; I combed through the public library for hours on end looking for photos of mafia men, but none of the photos showed people shooting guns *up into the*

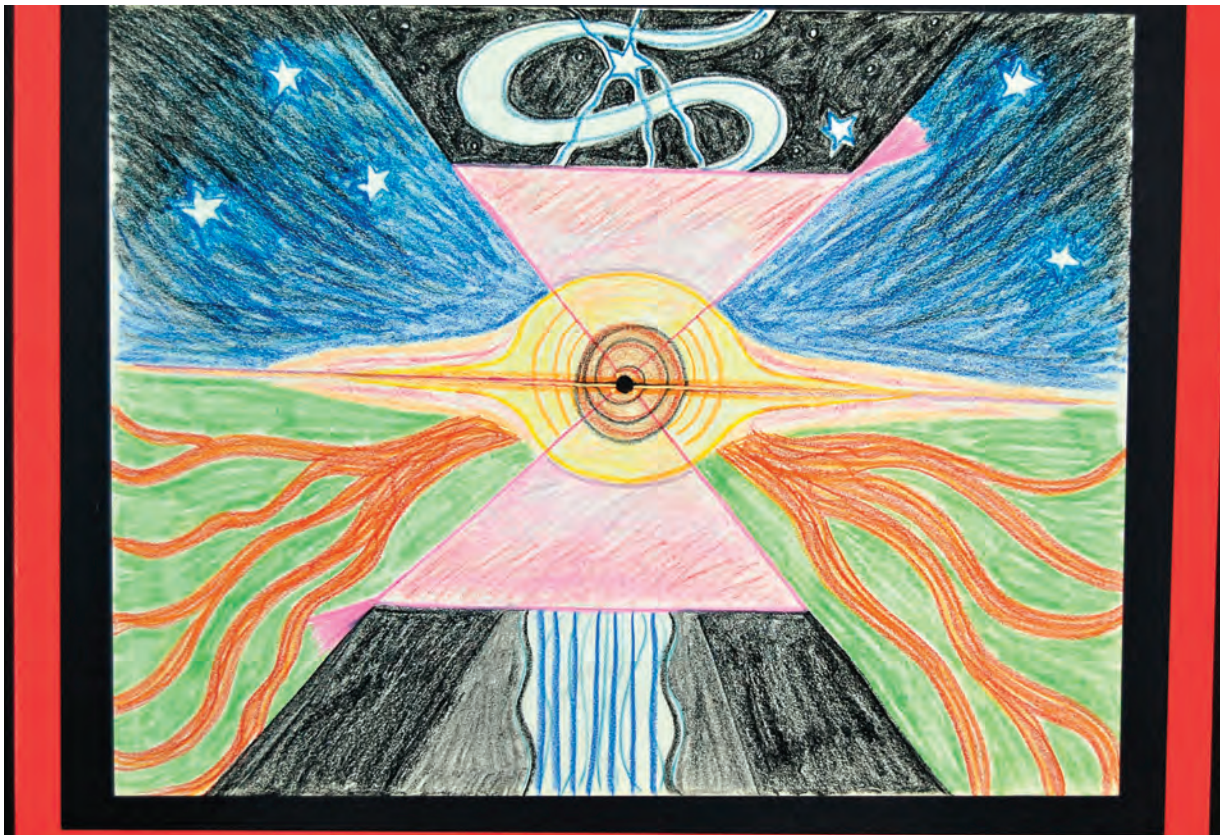
air. I scoured old movie stills from Mafia films, but only found two images that would work, and I used them for the two street-level guards at the doorways. I also found a photo of Al Capone, and put him out in front of the building; casually waiting for the others to do the dirty work. But I still needed photos for the guys who were actually *doing* the dirty work. How would I find images of men in just the right clothing, posed in just the right positions, and with their guns *firing into the sky*? Traditionally, gangsters have had little reason to shoot into the sky!

I decided I needed to stage something and take the photos of it myself. For several months I tried to get my friends, my sons, my sons' friends, my husband, or anyone else I came across, to pose as gangsters for me. I offered to rent the outfits and find some guns, and I explained that it wouldn't take very long. But it was all to no avail. No one wanted to do it! I felt very attached to finishing this picture, but became hopeless about finding my *bad guys*. My sons jokingly suggested that I would have to do it myself. Me? Me! Me - be the Mafia! I couldn't do that! Not only have I always hated having my picture taken, but I also felt a strong aversion to being a bad guy, and an even stronger aversion to pretending to shoot myself! I tried to avoid my inner Mafioso for many months until I realized that it was the only way I was going to be able to finish this collage. When I gave in to the idea of transforming myself into my own nemesis, I suddenly remembered that I owned a double-breasted, pinstriped suit that I bought on a whim in the 1980's. Why did I ever keep it, and where the heck was it? I found it instantly, along with a 1940's Stetson hat that I'd been storing for one of my sons, and after that, borrowing a few guns was easy.

It amazed me that I had searched high and low for Mafia imposters, for nearly a year, but once I decided to *be* the Mafia, I found everything I needed within a few days! As soon as I dressed the part, it was easy to embody the part. I felt like a killer within minutes, and rapidly struck the appropriate poses out in my backyard. I was fierce, I was strong, I was ruthless, and I was unstoppable! My husband snapped one photo after another, and in half an hour we were all done. It took me a long time to warm up to the idea, but in the end it was not so hard to shoot myself. I was getting closer to knowing my inner annihilator.

One night, shortly after completing this piece, I woke up from having this same childhood nightmare! My heart was pounding, and I was drenched with sweat. As I lay there feeling the same old childhood terror, I decided to try and somehow bring this never-ending nightmare to completion. I imagined myself back into the dream, and I saw the mob running at me with their guns poised to shoot. Instead of flying away as usual, I turned toward my attackers and asked them why they wanted to shoot me. They didn't hesitate - they just shot me down! My body was riddled with bullets and I fell to the ground, but then I floated up (dead) into the beautiful blue sky, and the Mafia shouted a chant up at me. It sounded like Gangsta Rap, and my poem, *Mafia Death Squad Chant*, comes straight from their mouths. My inner Mafia has taught me many lessons, including not to hold onto my identity too tightly, they've taught me that everything is free-floating, and if I get stuck believing in only one position or point of view - it means that I've fallen asleep. The mob taught me that I can't ever kill my own *annihilator* - I can only wake up to it.

Horizon Line



Spring 2005 (18 x 24 inches. Crayon and oil pastel on newsprint)

Horizon Line

Let it come – Let it go
 Your heart knows
 No duality
 ----- The horizon line -----
 Slices through
 Barriers of space and time

One day after meditating I found myself wondering, “Why is it so difficult for me to retain a deep sense of *allowing* things to just be as they are?” This *allowing* is an experience that I can access while meditating, swimming, or working in my garden, but once I enter into the world of my to-do list, my sense of *allowing* usually flies right out the window. While pondering this, I sat down and let myself get empty once more, and that’s when I made this drawing. The drawing and the accompanying poem only took five minutes to make, and it helped me a lot. I put them both up on the wall where I could look at them and be reminded that I feel well when I balance my stars and my roots, my going up and going down, my inward retreat and coming out into the world again. The picture indicates that the easiest way for me to do this is to center my awareness at the point where the parallel worlds of *being* and *doing* meet – at the horizon line I remember to love myself, others, the world, and the mystery of the interactions between them all. In this drawing, the image of a waterfall made its second appearance, but I still had no idea why it was there; I only knew that it was taking me way down, like deep roots.

Baby Money Dragon



Spring 2005 (17 x 6 inches. Handmade paper, paint, handspun yarn, wire, raffia, beads, ribbon, and sequins)

For a long time, I've struggled with not having quite enough money to meet my needs, and I'm habitually worried about where the money will come from to pay my bills. One day, I decided I was tired of worrying about money, and it was time to have fun with it instead. One of my blocks to having fun with money is that I don't enjoy playing with numbers, so I decided I needed to give money a *personality* that I could *relate* to – a personality that is fun, friendly, and easy to get along with, but also money also had to be a bit quirky and mercurial, because my financial matters sometimes seem elusive and tricky.

As a starting point, I thought about how everything is just made of little energy particles. I pondered what money energy particles might look like. Immediately, I imagined tiny baby dragons flying all around me in the air! They were everywhere, and they were very happy and energetic – flying at high speed, swooping, looping, and bumping into each other, and into me! These jovial baby dragons laughed and laughed, and let me know that they wanted to be *projected* onto, so that they could play the game of taking on one form or another. Great! I called all the baby dragons to me and asked them each to become a dollar bill and get on over to my bank account. “Play around in there,” I said. “Have a party! Move in for a while. Clump together into some one hundred dollar bills! I want you to appear on my next bank statement.”

“OK!” they said. Then I asked the baby money dragons if one of them would actually take on a physical form, so I could keep it in my bedroom as a constant reminder that they are all around just waiting to have some sort of fun engagement with me. Then this consensus reality Baby Money Dragon was born, and I told the other dragons I would hang it from the ceiling as if it was flying, I promised them it would be the last thing I

looked at each night before going to sleep and the first thing I looked at in the morning. I told them that I needed their playful and friendly energy to remind me how to enjoy a new type of relationship with money, and also to remind me that money dragons are everywhere (in my bedroom *and* in my wallet and my bank account). “OK!” they said. And that was how this baby money dragon came to live in my bedroom.

Birthing Universes

Spring 2005 (29 x 33 inches. Crayon and acrylic paint on newsprint)

For most of my life I have found refuge in *the void*. I dissolve into nothing and let the blackness swallow me up, just as a black hole devours the light. For most of my life, I've also had recurring dreams and experiences in which I am made of light *and* of the light-less void. I am simultaneously the light being born out of the void, the light being swallowed up by the void, and the pregnant and empty void itself. In this drawing, my body spans unimaginable distances in a timeless field of potential energy. My body is pure energy and also the emptiness that prevailed long before energy existed in any form at all. I am the birther of universes, and whole galaxies spin and play on the surface of my non-existent skin. I am the great mother, and out of my belly flows all of creation. I dance among the stars that I have created. I always was, and I always will be.

Poison Dream And Tarantula



Spring 2005 (18 x 24 inches. Oil pastel on newsprint)

The year my cancer diagnosis had reached its most serious point, I had three doctors tell me I would probably die if I didn't have the surgery they were recommending. I try never to make big decisions without sitting in the void first, so I sat, entered into the emptiness, and waited for a clear message on what to do about the prescribed surgery. More than once, I got the same very clear answer from *the voice*: "No, don't do it. This cancer represents something in you that needs to be transformed. If you remove the part of your body where the cancer is, it will just come back somewhere else. You have to cure it at the source." I trust this impeccable voice, so instead of having major surgery, I opted for minor surgeries instead, but after each minor procedure the cancer would quickly return. My doctors were very nervous about my repeated decision not to have the recommended surgery, and they insisted that I was risking my life by putting it off. I was on a death walk; either I would discover how to let go of what fed the cancer, or the cancer would kill me. I was not at all sure which way things would end up.

After the third decision not to have surgery, I had a very strong dream: I was on some eco tour through a jungle, and a man led me into a huge bamboo forest that had been planted there as a scenic park. As I entered into the densely planted bamboo, I realized I was the only one on this tour. I looked up and saw that the giant bamboo reached about three stories high, and each stalk was as big around as my torso. I was awe struck by their beauty, but I also felt nervous. As I looked up, I began to notice that men's bodies were loosely tied to the stalks of bamboo, and that these men were either dying or already dead and in various stages of decay. All the men were dressed in white and had turbans on their heads, and I realized they were all yogis, holy men, and spiritual teachers. Then I saw that my tour guide was dressed the same way. I felt horrified to suddenly see that

bodies were hanging all around me in twisted and grotesque positions, they looked thin and dehydrated, and vapor was rising out of them like steam. I knew that this vapor was their life force leaving their bodies as they died. I wanted to quickly get out of there, but I was deep into the thick bamboo jungle, and did not know which way to run in order to escape. Then my guide climbed up into the bamboo, which had formed a giant grid-work structure, like a huge lattice or a cage. I realized that this bamboo “cage” completely surrounded me, and then I saw my guide preparing a thick black paste that had steam rising from it. I knew the paste was poison, and that the guide had used it to kill these men. He came toward me with the paste, which he had formed into palm-sized balls, and using a big silver spoon, he started flinging the balls at me! If one touched me, I knew it would immediately eat into my skin and release my life force, and I would end up tied to a stalk of bamboo and left to die like all the others. I tried to escape by climbing up the bamboo lattice, but the “poison man” chased me and continued to lop steamy balls at me. I dodged the balls and climbed up the bamboo as fast as I could, and when I reached the top I could see some blue sky. I knew that in order to escape him, I would have to fly - but I suddenly realized that I couldn’t fly because I had lost my wings! The bamboo lattice had trapped me like a jail cell, and I looked desperately at the sky above me knowing that there was no escape. Just then one of the balls hit me on the back, and I felt all my strength leave my body as I collapsed onto the bamboo.

I woke up from the dream to find that I was drenched in sweat and steam *was* actually rising off my body, just as it had from the dying men in the dream! I was exhausted and could not get out of bed. I had a high fever and felt dehydrated. At first we thought I had a bad flu, but it turned out that I was having an allergic reaction to one of

my cancer medications; I really *was* being poisoned! I stopped taking the medication right away, but damage had been done to my already weak and overtaxed immune system, and I became very sick for ten days. As I lay in bed recovering from this setback, I had another strong “dream.” I don’t think I was actually asleep, but I cannot be sure, I only know that I met with a gently protective and very huge tarantula hanging in space just a few inches above my heart. I’ve always been afraid of spiders (especially tarantulas) but after my initial startle, I was surprised to find that I was not afraid of this one. The tarantula was much bigger than my hand, and she guarded the entrance to a black hole that also appeared just above my chest. I asked the tarantula what she was doing there. I heard her answer in my head, “I am the mother of darkness, and I am your ally. I am as ancient as your pain. I know the way. But you are not ready. Your wings don’t work and the sky is too far away. I will wait.”

I felt so much love from her, and I was glad she was there. I felt drawn to the black hole, but I was also relieved that she was guarding its entrance and keeping my heart from falling into the vortex. I knew that the tarantula, *the mother of before-time*, would protect me. I knew she would not let me go into the black hole until I was ready to *fly apart*. I knew that if I entered the vortex, nothing would ever be the same again. I didn’t know what kind of reality I’d emerge into, but I was certain that anything entering a black hole never comes out again. I would not be able to hold on to my self, I would not be able to hold on to anything; there would be only *nothing*. I waited to see when it would happen.

After having this dreamlike encounter, I felt the presence of the tarantula hanging out above my heart for several weeks. This experience seemed very real to me, and I

continuously wrestled with my attraction/aversion to entering the black hole. Many times I almost jumped into the vortex, but the tarantula stopped me. One day, I decided I was ready and the *mother of darkness* said “Yes.” I leaped into the void and stayed in a state of *nothingness* for a very long time. I think that in consensus reality time, I laid in bed with a very high fever for two days before the vortex gently tumbled me back out into the everyday world again. The *mother of darkness* had vanished, but the Adawees arrived in her wake. In the Cherokee tradition, the Adawees are the guardians of the four directions of the earth, and they are also the guardians of the four directions of our minds; they are a little bit like guardian angels. As I lay in bed, the Adawees floated just above me, and waited for me to fully return. Even when I lost my body, even when I lost my mind, they lovingly waited for me in order to celebrate my return. They held a place for me, so that I was able to come back to the Earth.

For several weeks after this experience, things looked much the same in consensus reality, but my relationship to everything *felt* so different. Pain, earth, sky, people, and my body no longer had any rough edges around them. My pain seemed especially different; it was milder, less hostile, and more fluid. I felt connected to both the earth and the sky, and I felt peaceful, happy, and open. My trip into void of the black hole seemed to have made a permanent bridge between the worlds for me. I still felt that I was a lot bigger than my human body, but now for the first time in my life, my body seemed to fit me and like a custom-made glove; I could ease myself comfortably into it. I was home, *even while in my body*, and I celebrated arriving! I thanked the tarantula for teaching me how to live in both worlds at once.

After a few weeks spent in the afterglow of my black hole experience, my health really took a dive. The allergic reaction to the medication seriously exacerbated my chronic fatigue, and I was trapped in the “cage” of my bed for nine months and for the first time in my life, even my will-power could not get me back into participating in the activities of the everyday world. I had passed safely in and out of a dreamland black hole, but now I had entered a metaphoric black hole as it manifested in consensus reality; during the nine months that followed, my physical pain increased to the point where I really could not find a way to endure it, and so for the second time I felt like I would surely fly apart – and I became suicidal. A few times, the tarantula came to me and gently said, “The pain is just resistance - mysterious resistance. What are you resisting? Who is resisting? Be bigger than your body and still live authentically *in* your body. This is a Koan. This Koan will save your life. Wrestle with it - fight for your life! Sink deeper into the Mystery.”

Your Name Is StarBear

Spring 2005-Fall 2007 (30 x 10 inches. Antique glass, faux fur, batting, paint, wire, beads, paper mache, dried moss and flowers, Styrofoam, plastic eyes)

Earth Task

Walking between the worlds,
You must live in the West. Don't be lazy.
Stay on that path, StarBear.
Quit imagining you can do anything else.
It will cost your life.
You *are* that path.
You are empty; light pouring into the void.
Remember how much you want to be home.
Dissolve into the light
And surround it with darkness.
The I AM
Contained
In
Nothing.

While driving in a rainstorm on a dark and curvy country road, my full attention was on getting home safely, when I suddenly heard someone say, “Your name is StarBear.” This startled me, but the name *StarBear* stood out to me as something very special, and strangely familiar. Was the voice coming from the radio? I turned the volume up, but found the radio wasn’t even turned on, and I realized that I couldn’t have heard it above the rain pounding on the car roof anyway. I heard the voice loud and clear though, as it insistently, but kindly repeated, “Your name is StarBear.” Oh, it was *the* voice! I let the message sink in for a minute. Yes, it felt right. Stars had always been like home to me; in my mind, stars represent time and timelessness, and they bridge the past and the future because some stars we see aren’t even physically there anymore, yet their light is reaching our eyes *now*. Yes, my own star-dreaming is a big part of who I am, so having the word *star* in my name felt right.

I have always loved bears. Since early childhood, bears have fascinated me, especially grizzly bears! Grizzly bears have such a weighty, solid presence and an unmovable nature; to me they are beautiful and powerfully fierce. If you encounter a grizzly eating berries on your path, you’d better find another path to take because that bear is not moving out of *your* way! I imagine that bears just follow their own rhythm: they eat, sleep, hibernate, wake up, mate, etc. – all in their own *bear time*. Don’t try to rush a bear! I long to be more bear-like; to be more solidly grounded on the earth in each moment, to follow my own rhythm and not get knocked off my path so easily. Having the word *bear* in my name also felt right.

StarBear seemed like the perfect name for me, because it bridged the worlds of sky and earth, and brought my two natures together. Yes, StarBear would be the perfect

ally to help me go through life. “Your name is STARBEAR!” *the voice* demanded again, and I realized that it wanted a reply. “Yes,” I said, “I will remember that. Thank you, it will help so much to know this.” But then it persisted, “Your family name IS StarBear,” it declared loudly and emphatically. This time I understood that the voice was telling me to actually *change* my last name in the consensus reality world. I found this shocking and I tried to negotiate, “How about I just tell close friends that I learned my true name, and keep it mostly a secret; like a sacred spirit-name that only my friends are privy to? You know, some names are so sacred you can’t say them out loud or they lose their power.”

“Your NAME is StarBear,” the voice unapologetically insisted. I knew then that I wasn’t getting out of this one, and that changing my last name to StarBear would change my life in some way, because I wouldn’t be able to hide my true nature from the consensus reality world. It was terrifying to think of legally changing my name to a *woo-woo* thing like StarBear. At the same time, I wondered if it had been my Cherokee grandma’s family name and in that case, it would be wonderful to honor her by bringing my Cherokee family name back into the world. “Agh...” I berated myself, “but I don’t look Cherokee, I wasn’t raised in a traditional native way. People of all sorts will likely think that I’m weird with a name like that. Besides, my first name is already weird enough. This is just too much! Can’t I just focus on driving home in the rain without having all this upset?”

For two and a half years, I wrestled internally with my fears about legally changing my last name to StarBear. Finally I had the nerve to do it, and fortunately there have been no negative repercussions as a result, but there have been countless benefits. The greatest of these is that I feel deeply *congruent* whenever I write or say my name,

and my name constantly reminds me of who I am, where I came from, and where I'm going. This piece of sculpture reflects my struggle to grow into my name. I created the earth and put some creatures on it, and then held it up with a glass pedestal to give it the appearance of floating in space. I tried to create the StarBear several times over the course of two years, but nothing ever felt right, and I would give up on each attempt soon after beginning it. I experienced a similar struggle with the legal aspect of changing my name: I would get started with the paperwork, or set a court date, but then something would get in the way and I'd give up on it again. I was finally able to finish the StarBear sculpture within hours of deciding to embrace the rightness of a legal name change and not too long after that I quickly and easily dealt with the court-related details of making StarBear my legal last name.

Dragon-Wind: Connecting All Levels

Fall 2005 (25 x 36 inches. Collage: hand-made and hand-dyed paper, glass beads, gold thread, crayon, acrylic paint)

This dragon appeared to me during one of the most extreme states I've ever experienced. I was having a series of multiple seizures but I didn't know it – all I knew was that I was suspended in a warm, calm blue sky and there was a gorgeous two-headed dragon floating above me. The dragon's beautiful shimmering scales reflected every color of the rainbow, and it had an ecstatic presence! I knew that it was a blessing that this magical being had come to hang-out with me and teach me for awhile. The two-headed dragon was male at one end and female at the other end, and it taught me about the union of opposites, and the illusion of duality. At a certain point, I dissolved into being the dragon for a while, and then I was myself again, floating just beneath its enormous, luminous body. I went back and forth like this for a while (being 'me' and then being one with the dragon) until I understood that there was really no difference between my spirit and the spirit of this two-headed dragon.

After what seemed like many days, I heard a faint, far-off wailing sound. Slowly, the wailing got a little louder until I recognized the sound as a woman howling in terror. I was suddenly transported to a steep mountainside, and a Samurai warrior was standing over me, ready to slice my head off with his sword. I was the one shrieking and wailing as I lay on my back looking up at the man with his raised sword, and frantically trying to crawl away from him, up the mountain side - but I knew it was useless and that my death was imminent. Then I heard someone yelling to me; a man was calling out my name from far away. My awareness shifted away from the scene with the Samurai as I focused on the sound of this man's voice, but I could still hear the woman shrieking, and I knew she was about to die. I became confused about which voice to attend to, but ended up focusing on the man's voice because the woman's screaming was just too alarming and

painful to listen to. I heard the man calling out my name and I strained to hear some content because it felt like he was trying to tell me something. Finally I understood the words, “Anusuya! Come back! You have to come back now!” Over and over, he yelled this at me. I didn’t know what he was talking about, but after a while I realized that I might have a body, and that maybe if I concentrated all my efforts on this idea; I might be able to locate myself in space and time. I tried really hard to do this, but I couldn’t imagine what having a body felt like; I only had an awareness of vibrating sounds reaching through a thick black void.

After a long, long time of focusing on the concept of “coming back” into a body, I heard the horrible shrieking sounds from the woman on the mountainside - coming out of *me*. The sound felt visceral, like vomiting, and the sound-vomit was coming up from the ground and through me as if it was hot lava, and I was a hollow tube. It flowed wildly and violently up through me, like a spiraling tornado-wind. The hot wind was the dragon energy moving through my bones and even through each cell! I could feel the dragon’s presence and its energy, but it felt too strong for me to tolerate holding it in my body. The *dragon-wind* rushed up through the center of me, and burst out of my throat with a great and painful power. I became aware of my neck and mouth then, like a central wind-channel that the dragon was traveling through, but I still didn’t have any awareness of my other body parts. It took a couple of hours, but gradually I was able to feel my whole body again, and then I laid exhausted in bed for nearly a week with a high fever, and a very inflamed sore throat, and for several days I lost my voice completely. During that time I had several more out-of-body encounters with the dragon, but none were as

extensive as the first, because my husband stayed with me and diligently called me back whenever he saw me even exhibit a slight tendency toward slipping away again.

The entire time that I was having the first dragon experience, I was also having grand mal seizures, one after another, for a straight forty-five minutes. My husband was with me at the time, and he says that I just suddenly went into convulsions and threw myself off of the bed. I writhed and arched and flailed on the floor, screaming the whole time. He described my cries as “blood curdling, as if someone was being killed” - and he was afraid that a neighbor might call the police. He was terrified and didn’t know what to do. Knowing that I hate going to the hospital (it usually makes me worse rather than better), he simply stayed with me and cared for me the best he could. My distraught husband tried to calm me, call me back, and keep me safe for the entire time, but I didn’t respond to him until the last fifteen minutes or so of the forty-five minute episode.

When I was feeling well again, I made this picture to remind me of the amazing two-headed dragon, and to make sure I would clearly remember all that it taught me about time, reversing time, timelessness, unity and duality, moving seamlessly in two opposite directions at once, and being in all levels of reality simultaneously.

This Is My Body

Winter 2005 (20 x 25 inches. Crayon on newsprint)

For many months after my intense dragon experience, I tried to integrate the teachings of the two-headed dragon and the extremely vivid, larger-than-life experience I'd had. I made this drawing to show how the dragon was me, and I was the dragon, and to illustrate how my human body is only a very small part of a much larger body. In this drawing my *human* body is just a tiny speck somewhere in the center of the pulsating, brown, disc-like thing, (consensus reality) which the waterfall passes through. The picture depicts an enormous waterfall made of light and energy, pouring out of the dragon and cascading down to the earth-plane. It flows right through the physical plane and into the void. This void, the dragon, the pounding waterfall, and every universe in existence - is my *real* body. When I created the picture this all made complete sense to me, and it still does, especially on a visceral level - but I can really find no words to adequately describe or explain it.

This was the third time that a waterfall had appeared in my artwork.

Four-Seasons Tree

Spring 2006 (18 x 24 inches. Colored pencil on newsprint)

Underbelly Deep

This time when I grow roots I feel the sun melting,
I hear worms dancing dirty ... dirty in the mud and singing
out with joy ... pulsing,
Earth's hallow belly rumbles,
pounding
her molten heartbeat oozes up
right to the tip
of my nose. On the tip
of my tongue
sleeping seeds begin to groan
and POP! while I am upside
down in the twisted ... hot-rock-deep ... down
snaking through time ... smiling back
tomorrow's growing old ... full
of unborn rainbows
thirsting for a downpour.
Meanwhile, the moss keeps growing
and the rocks are cracking -
up with hard ... hot ... laughter ... laughing
laughing ... they slowly
roll
away.

I went for a walk in town and found myself browsing the isles of an import shop, when a small sculpture of some birds in a tree really caught my attention. The birds were small, and they were evenly distributed around the tips of the branches, there were only a few leaves on the tree so the birds really stood out against the barren branches. I looked the sculpture for a long time and became transfixed as I entered into the world of those little birds. I really didn't want to leave without taking this bird-tree home with me. "But I don't *need* it," I reasoned with myself, "I have enough things already. Where would I put it? And, besides, I can't afford it." So I left without the sculpture, but the image stayed with me throughout the week, and I realized that this bird-tree must be an important dream image for me, and I felt like it was a puzzle-piece in my healing journey somehow. Maybe I needed to fly more, like the birds? Or maybe I needed to be more rooted, like the tree? I was just in love with that bird-tree image!

Then exactly one week after seeing the sculpture in the store, I got out of bed in the morning, went into my kitchen, and opened up the curtain above the kitchen sink. When I looked out of the window into my garden I gasped! My maple tree had lost nearly all of its leaves during the night, and a flock of very small birds was artistically perched on top of its branches. It looked exactly like the bird-tree sculpture, I couldn't believe my eyes! Then suddenly all at once the birds rose up, and for a moment they hovered like a cloud over the tree, then in a flash they flew away. The whole thing took my breath away; I'd never seen anything like this before – except in that bird-tree sculpture that I'd fallen in love with. This experience immediately affected my body, and I understood the healing power in the image; I felt both the grounded energy of the tree, and the lightning-

fast energy of the birds coursing through my body, and I experienced these two energies as if I was simultaneously rooted to the earth and flying through the sky!

A couple of mornings later, in the middle of a meditation I got the urge to draw, and out came a very quick sketch of the bird-tree. Looking at it afterwards, I became aware of how strongly I want to bring my two worlds together – my in-the-earth, deeply rooted ancient world, and my flying up and away into-the-sky world. In my drawing, the tree branches represent the four seasons, which reminds me that life is all about balancing the parts, it's about being whole by including everything. The drawing shows eternity folding back on itself through the serpent swallowing its own tail, and through the vortex arriving and departing into the void from the top and bottom of the page as one cosmic continuation. The whole thing is encased in a soft blackness that is shaped a bit like a womb, or like curtains opening and closing. It is all there – the whole glorious, painful, sacred drama of life: the light, the dark, coming and going, death and rebirth, the void, the earth, and the cyclical nature of it all.

Being Versus Doing



Summer 2006 (44 x 30 inches. Paper collage and glitter)

One night, I sat sorting through a pile of mail from the week, and there was an amazing amount of junk mail; catalogues for yoga and hiking gear, a free recipe magazine from the health food store, a catalogue from a new-age book store, and a flyer from the neighborhood fitness center. In front of me I had a whole stack of “healthy” junk mail! I didn’t ask for any of these materials, they just came to my door like so many of my desires, passions, and goals just come into my head; uninvited. As I stared at the stack of junk mail I saw my inner program about being someone who tries to live a “healthy” life and do “healthy” things for myself and for others. I saw how even my identification with the *healthy stuff* took me away from living a life empty of extraneous thoughts, ideas, and activities. I could see how I let my passions define my life, and how my psychological structures easily take me over and dictate my path. I wanted to take a good look at what I was telling myself about *things* and *experiences*, and *states of mind* that I *needed* in order to have a rich and meaningful life.

Without pondering or daydreaming, I quickly went through the catalogues and magazines and cut out anything that grabbed my attention. I could literally feel certain words or phrases lodge into my body as I read them. Once an array of words and phrases were carpeting my floor, I started gluing them onto one side of a piece of poster board. I was reserving the other side of the board for the mystery of *living empty* – for living free of programming. The empty side was about embracing the qualities of a StarBear, by living with the non-attached overview of a star, and the consensus reality gusto and earth-consciousness of a bear. One side of the paper remained empty, while the other side quickly filled up!

When I stood back and looked at my creation, the empty side seemed like the night sky, and the full side seemed like the earth. I added clouds and rocks accordingly, and then I looked again and felt sad that the two sides didn't seem to relate to one another at all. I walked vectors (or directional paths) to represent each side, and found a 'Big U' direction that connected both paths: the Big U path was a river that flowed under and between both sides. Ah ha; falling water was the common denominator! So I added the river and a waterfall, and also some StarBears playing in the river on *both* sides.

Looking at the finished collage, I could see that both halves of my life are important, but I needed to give equal space to each side, and most importantly I needed to play more in the river that connects them both, remembering that the undercurrent of my life is the flow and power of falling water.

The Pain Monster

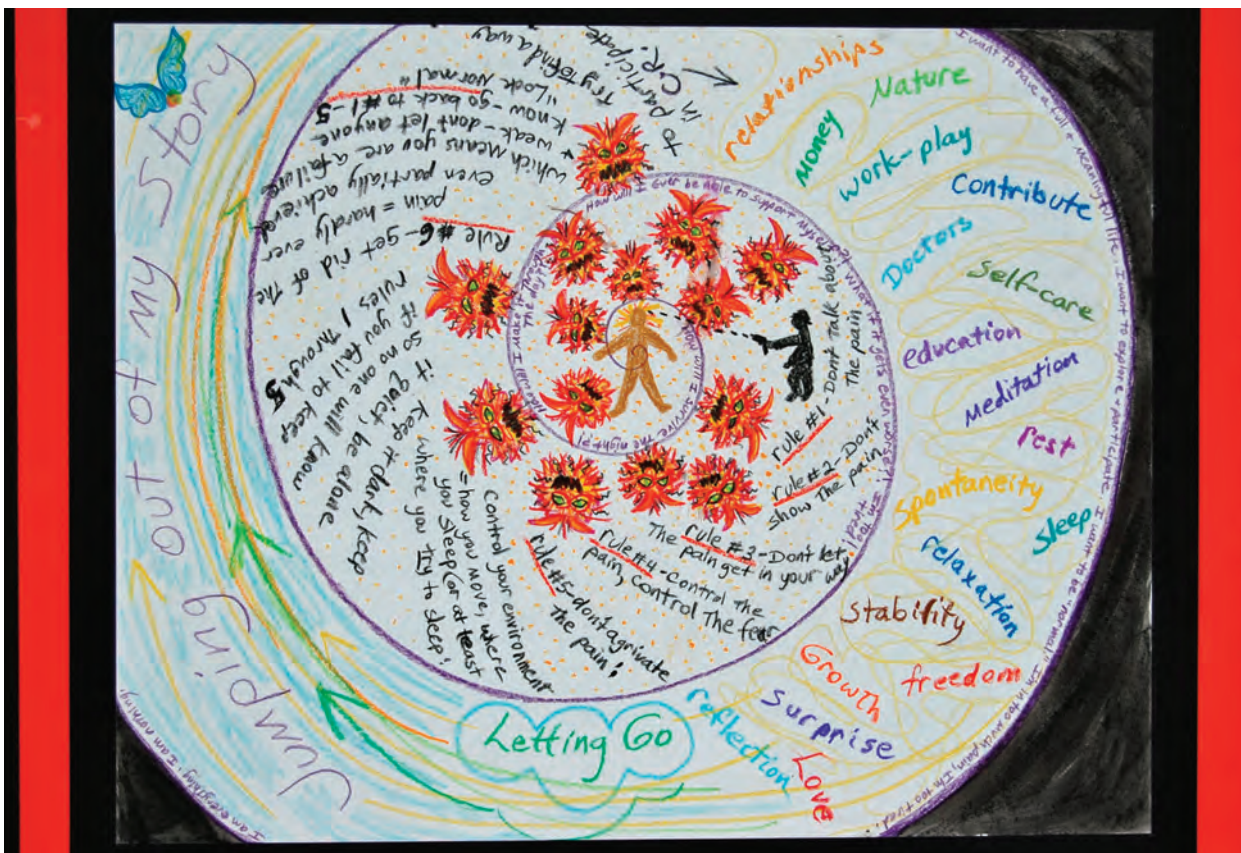


Fall 2006 (18 x 24 inches. Oil pastel and watercolor on newsprint)

The first time I took out all of my drawings and looked at them as a collection, I was amazed to notice that I hadn't done any artwork or writing about my biggest daily struggle: chronic pain! I knew it was time to address the experience of chronic pain in my life, but I was really scared to focus on it - which was undoubtedly why this issue hadn't surfaced in any of my previous drawings! I sat down and emptied myself of thoughts and just stayed open to what wanted to emerge, and suddenly I felt an urge to let something come out onto paper. I got a blank sheet of paper and quickly drew the energy of my physical pain and named it The Pain Monster. As I studied him, I realized that when he comes at me full force, I immediately retreat to *the refuge*, without the refuge I would not be able to survive the intensity or the duration of the pain. So I got some paint and made the refuge, I wanted black paint because it seemed to embody the velvety depth of the void better than the criss-crossing lines of oil pastel would, and I wanted to emphasize the difference in the qualities between the pain monster and the refuge.

I was very familiar with the experience that the Pain Monster created in my body and in my mind, and I also knew well what it was like to enter the refuge, or the void, but I hadn't had the experience of seeing them both as a 'coupled' pair. Now, with the vantage point of the emotional distance that I felt once the monster was safely contained on a flat piece of paper, it made me wonder what it might be like to also see *myself* from a distance and observe how these two 'pain and refuge' figures were affecting my life. In my head as I looked at the painting I just made, I could see a detached view of my ever-repeating pain cycle. While I still felt detached, I closed my eyes and emptied my thoughts, to see what would come next - and then I felt the urge to draw again. I very quickly drew *Jumping Out of My Story*.

Jumping Out Of My Story



Fall 2006 (18 x 24 inches. Oil pastel and watercolor on newsprint)

After drawing the *Pain Monster*, I realized that I had never explored my “story” of living in chronic pain and I became curious to see how it would look if I mapped this story out on paper. I quickly sketched the story of getting shot (the beginning of my chronic pain) by placing the image of my body at the center of the page and drawing pain radiating out of my head. I drew the gunshot, then Pain Monsters all around, and then I drew a spiral radiating out from my gut and into the world; this demonstrated how far-reaching the pain and fear really were. I filled this space in with my many coping skills: rules I have had to live by in order to manage my pain levels. I finished with all my goals, passions, and desires for my life. When I looked at the whole thing, I realized that the pain and the rules were standing between me and the life I desired. I was shocked to see how much pain management had ruled my life, and how strictly I had been controlling my environment in order to cope with the severity of the pain. When I saw all of this clearly outlined on paper, I no longer wanted to be so secretive about my pain because I could see that part of the Pain Monster’s power was fueled by the isolation and secrecy involved in my constant focus on trying to appear “normal.”

In my first fearful attempt to *come out* about how much pain was ruling my life, I showed this drawing to my two adult sons. I was really nervous about revealing my big secret to them but when they saw it and read it, they both replied quite matter-of-factly, “Oh, we already know this. It’s how you are. We grew up knowing what the ‘rules’ were in order for you to function. We knew to be quiet when you were in bed, we knew when you didn’t sleep, and we knew we were not to talk about your pain.” In order to live with me as they were growing up, my sons were bound by the very same rules I was – the Pain

Monster ran the house! This was not a secret to my children, but they were surprised to find out that I thought it had been a secret.

I kept this drawing handy and meditated on it several times a week for a couple of months. I needed to study my pain “map” in order to fully stay conscious of what my pattern and story was. Facing the far-reaching effects of my chronic pain was very trying for me emotionally, and I cried a lot during this time; finally the grief I had suppressed for twenty years was ready to be recognized and released. I did not know how to *jump out of my story* yet, I just knew that the first step was seeing my life for what it was, and that no matter how painful or embarrassing it was for me to allow people to know that my life revolved around pain management, I was not willing to keep it a secret any longer.

Words Inside The Spiral:

- How will I survive the night?
- How will I make it through the day?!
- How will I ever be able to support myself?!
- What if it gets even worse?!
- I’m too tired!

The Rules:

1. Don’t talk about the pain
2. Don’t show the pain (hide it)
3. Don’t let the pain get in your way (override it)
4. Control the pain, control the fear (through will power and psychically ‘leaving’ my body)

5. Don't aggravate the pain

- control your environment – how you move, where you sleep (or at least where you try to sleep)!
- Keep it dark, keep it quiet, be alone so no one will know if you fail to keep rules 1 through 5

6. Get rid of the pain

- Hardly ever even partially achieved which means;
- You are a failure
- And weak
- Don't let anyone know this
- Go back to #1 through #5 and “look normal”
- Try to find a way to participate in CR =
- Relationship, money, nature, work-play, contribute, doctors, self-care, education, meditation, rest, spontaneity, sleep, relaxation, stability, freedom, growth, surprise, love, reflection

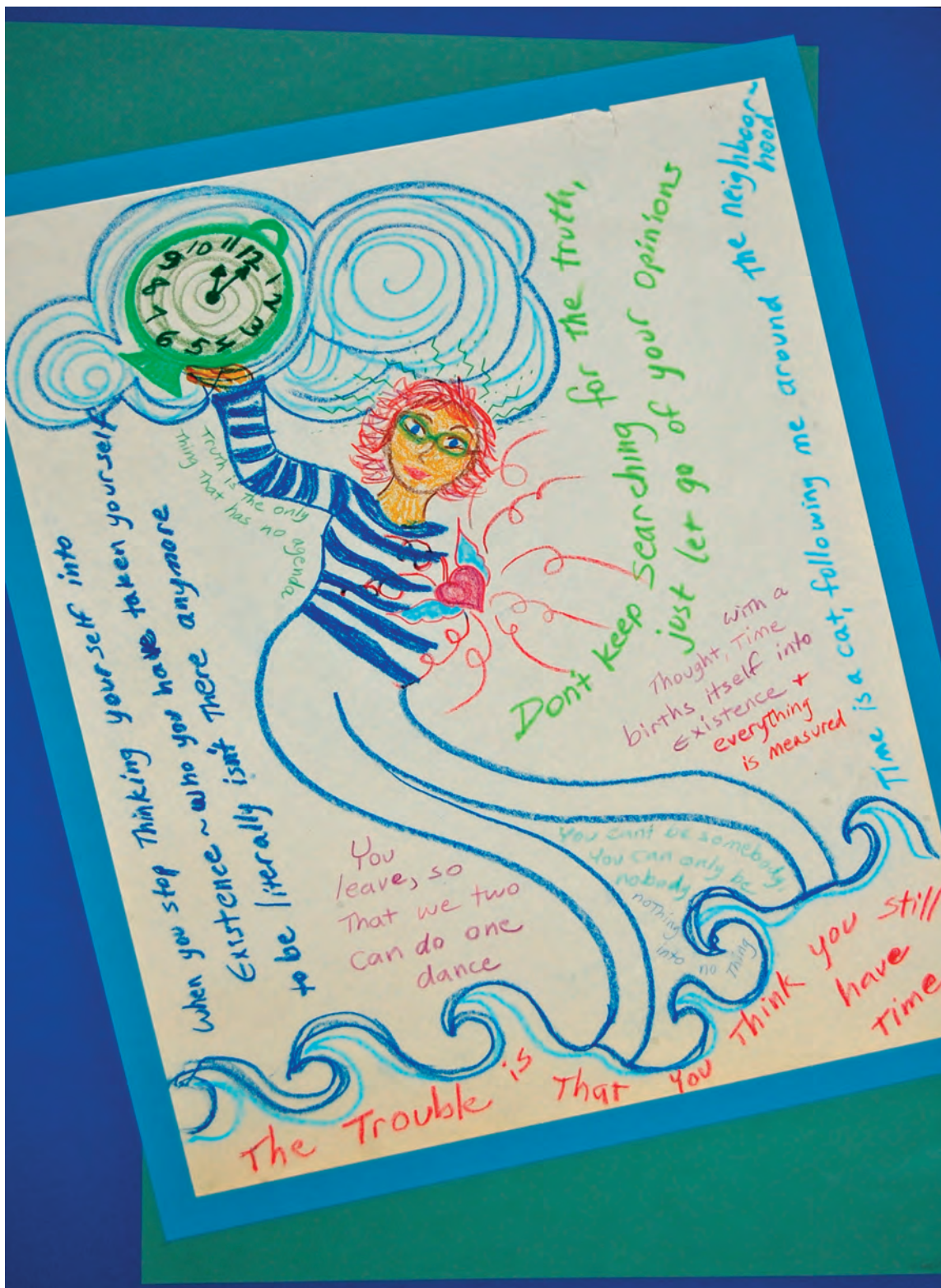
Words On The Outside Spiral

- I want to have a full and meaningful life
- I want to explore and participate
- I want to be “normal”
- I'm in too much pain
- I'm too tired

Letting Go

- Jumping out of my story
- I am everything
- I am nothing

Time



Fall 2006 (18 x 24 inches. Oil pastel on newsprint)

The Veil - Lifted

Time is a voodoo cat stalking her prey
 Unflinchingly focused
 She pierces your eyes with
 Her intention -
 Hypnotized.
 Blinded.

Gravity, that Mafioso
 Unrelentingly reels you into service –
 Hand-over your wings or
 Fly away homeless.
 No escape
 But death.

These bones
 A cage containing is and is-not. Me.
 Painful enclosure
 My wildness bucks and froths at the mouth
 Demanding freedom.
 The protest futile
 Agony increased by my rage.

Impossible task
 This desire to unite matter and spirit
 Personalities so disparate
 They must inhabit alternate universes
 Each annihilating the other
 With a mere thought – no thought.

*Time is a cat
 Following me around the neighborhood
 Jonesin' for a glance in her direction.
 I'm not looking.*

*Gravity
 He's a river – lover - tango dancer
 Why resist the flow?
 Rhythmically he penetrates me to the core
 I surrender.
 Still-point.*

(Continued on next page)

(Continued from last page)

*Stars float around inside
The boundary of my skin
Velvet infinity; my blood
Sacred ancient galaxy; this body
An ocean-in-a-bottle, sloshing.*

*My eyes, heart and fingers are antennae
Probing for connection
Desire, then: open and reach...
Feel the time-cat slink away
The awkward moment
When gravity pulls us each
Toward and against
The choice to become empty. Merge.
Oh, sacred dance
Two become one
Empty
And
Overflowing.*

One night as I was headed off to bed, I felt that (now familiar) urge to draw something, so I grabbed some paper and in a few minutes I was done. I was really too tired right then to spend any time looking at what came out onto the paper, but it was comforting to see the drawing the next morning. It was a time in my life when I frequently felt worried or scared, and the images and words in this drawing had the effect of calming me down, so I kept it close by for several weeks. *Time* shows my feet as a part of the river and as one with the Tao, and it depicts all of my heart-attachments flying away. When I enter the world of this picture, the pressure of linear time (represented by the clock) holds no power over me and emotions don't sway me. There is no particular direction to go in, and I'm simply one with the river and flowing in sync with the Tao.

This picture is about a way of life where decisions can get made and things can get done without much effort or even a need to know why. It reminds me of my tendency to have too many goals and attachments, feel too pressured by the clock, and hold too many questions in my head. It helps me see that my identity is frequently attached to a viewpoint instead of simply flowing with the Tao. The Mafia Death Squad Chant and this drawing are about the death of my attachment to my *little u* identity, and they both remind me that I need to let go of my attachment, in order to be fully present in my life.

Words Appearing On The Drawing:

- With a thought, time births itself into existence and everything is measured
- The trouble is that you think you still have time*
- Time is a cat, following me around the neighborhood
- Truth is the only thing that has no agenda*
- Don't keep searching for the truth, just let go of your opinions*
- When you stop thinking yourself into existence, who you think you have taken yourself to be, literally isn't there anymore*
- You can't be somebody, you can only be nobody: nothing into no thing
- You leave, so that we two can do one dance**

*Phrases Directly Inspired By The Teachings Of Adyashanti

** From A Poem By Lala

Pain Is Only Memories



December 2006 (18 x 24 inches. Acrylic, gouache, and oil pastel on watercolor paper)

I woke up in the middle of the night because the intensity of the pain in my head was engulfing my entire awareness. I worked on myself using self-massage, yoga, and meditation, and I was finally able to enter an altered state in which the pain didn't have such a tight grip on me. From this calm and detached place, I could still see my thought processes trying to make sense of the pain. When I closed my eyes, I saw a vivid network in my brain, which was made up of stories about the pain, rules of how to live with the pain, and fears of what would happen if the pain kept me from living the life I desired. As I watched thoughts flash into my awareness, I also saw how my brain categorized, sorted, and multiplied those thoughts, and how that process actually increased and perpetuated my experience of emotional and physical pain. I became fascinated by the imagery of this *pain-memory network*. After a couple of hours of watching how the pain network functioned, I understood how it was possible for me to change old patterns in my brain by “unplugging” from pain stories. I got out of bed and painted this picture as a way of remembering what I'd learned.

The background of this picture depicts the blackness of the void and energy spirals or vortexes that funnel me into the timeless state of emptiness. Overlaid is a picture of my *little u* mind: composed of a hypnotizing network of flashing thoughts and self-supporting concepts. Each time I experience something that my *little u* defines as painful, a story describing the experience becomes part of my subconscious pain network, which is continually reinforcing itself. The network is divided into *pain categories* (represented by the gold spots), and each of these spots is its own little world containing a specific set of rules.

Every time I experience some emotional or physical resistance to what is happening, my *little u* self makes up a story about it, and this story gets plugged into the appropriate gold spot where it is then imprinted as a new colored dot, and added onto a similar pre-existing story line. Every time a dot is added to the network, it causes the adjacent dots to get excited and “light up” as the new story reinforces, validates, and substantiates the others that came before it. For example, in the middle of the night, I woke up with a lot of head pain and a whole story immediately formed itself around the experience of the pain, the story went something like this: “If this pain gets any worse, I won’t be able to stand it” (*fear* spot lights up and a dot is added on to the others radiating out from it). “I will have to spend my day dealing with intense pain and re-arrange my schedule to get to the doctor for a cranial treatment” (*control* spot lights up and a dot is added). “Then I won’t have any time for seeing clients today” (*time* spot lights up and a dot is added). “My work life will suffer, and I will never be able to earn a living like a normal person” (*normal* spot lights up and a dot is added). “With all these doctor bills and my inability to work, I won’t survive if something happens and my husband can’t financially support me” (*safe* spot and *limit* spot light up and dots are added). “I will never be a successful human being, and I’m just not able to function in the ‘real’ world” (*real* spot lights up and a dot is added which triggers the *bad* and *good* and *desire* spots to light up as well, because their dots are now touching each other). On and on the story grows as each spot lights up with memories of past story-lines, which reinforce current feelings and thoughts. The current story-line is added to the others, creating one more colored dot on the chain of dots radiating out from each main category, and this adding-on process continually thickens and inter-links the connections between categories. The

pain network grows just like the spider web shaped scar tissue growing in my head and neck, and it causes me to have similar restrictions; my freedom of movement and my spontaneity are impinged upon each time a new dot or *vignette-tendrils* is added to the network. My pain is comprised of memories creating story lines, and the story lines grow with projections into the future (e.g., stories about what might happen in the next split second, or the next day, or the next year, or in my old age, etc.).

As I looked at the picture of this colorful and ever growing network and realized that this phenomenon is part of what creates chronic pain and chronic fatigue, because anything “chronic” involves taking an experience and replicating it again and again: moving the past into the future. I realized that I could reverse this process by jumping out of my stories and into the black spirals of emptiness depicted in the picture. If I could do this often enough, then I could “shrink” the story lines, and reverse the process of chronic fatigue and pain: because all of these processes are dependent on plugging into past suffering and projecting it into the future.

This picture helps me to remember that pain is only memories. If I live in the emptiness of each eternal moment, there is no baggage from the past, no storyline shaping my *little u* identity, and therefore no pain beyond the millisecond sensation in each present moment. When I unplug from the memory of the pain, and do not reside in the awareness of past or future, then I can’t be held hostage by linear time; so knowing that *pain is only memories* facilitates *jumping out of my story* and that is how I can get rid of that pesky *time-cat* as well! Wow, this picture helped me connect the dots in a big way.

Support From The Orchids



January 2007 (35 x 43 inches. Mixed media collage, handmade paper)

Status: Exotic, Rare

Status: rare

Misunderstood for years
when brought into cultivation.

Status: endangered

This is considered the easiest cypripedium to grow in the home greenhouse: 10 of these plants have been successfully grown in captivity. Needs a special alkaline, lime-based woodlands compost, kept moist with rainwater or reverse-osmosis filtered water. Feed with fish meal and seaweed every week until early August. Must be un-potted to simulate winter; cut leaves off after the first hard frost, carefully wrap root and crown in plastic, then put into a refrigerator at 40 degrees for 3 months to produce leaves the following spring. New plants take 8 years or more to flower.

Status: endangered

Must wind up in a crevice of a tree trunk that is not too wet, not too dry, not too bright and not too shady, and then become infected by a fungus that will nourish it, rather than digest it.

Status: increasingly rare

Transplanting wildings rarely succeeds.

Status: rare

Must be pollinated by a moth
with a 10 inch tongue.

I wrote one for myself, as if I was an orchid:

Status: Exotic
Rare

(This seemed right, but I looked up the definitions of exotic and rare, just to make sure – yes; it seemed perfect!)

Exotic : not native to the place where found

Rare : marked by wide separation of component particles

Status: exotic, rare

Found only inside a waterfall, requires infinite space so that awareness can expand simultaneously in all directions. Thrives in timelessness. Needs intimate connection to others while in the midst of silence.

To enhance blooming: expose regularly to a variety of people, plants and animals, playfulness, artistic expression, Argentine tango dancing, Tantric sex, abundant time in nature, and naked exposure to sunlight.

When I made this collage, I had been feeling really down on myself for not being healthier and more robust, and for needing to spend so much time and money on doctors of one kind or another. I struggled with my inner critic and often argued with myself. The more compassionate side of me would think: “Why not love my body with all its symptoms and why not love my quirky life path with all its ups and downs? Why not just love what IS, because any other attitude just causes too much suffering? Why can’t I see my personal process as an expression of nature? Everything in nature has its own limitations and needs, and its own unique beauty. I am no exception.” Then the critical side of me would pipe up: “Ugh, I’m too picky about what I eat, where I sleep, what chemicals I’m exposed to. It seems like I have way too many *special needs*. I’ve become hyper-vigilant in my attempt to avoid aggravating any of my body symptoms. I hate that. I feel like a reject, some mistake, some accident of nature that the world would be better off without. I’m a mess. I could never survive in the *wild*. I’m persnickety. I need a certain kind of food, my special bed, a host of doctors to hold my body together. It’s disgusting! It’s embarrassing! I hate that I’m not more adaptable! Yuck I hate *me* – or at least I hate my body.”

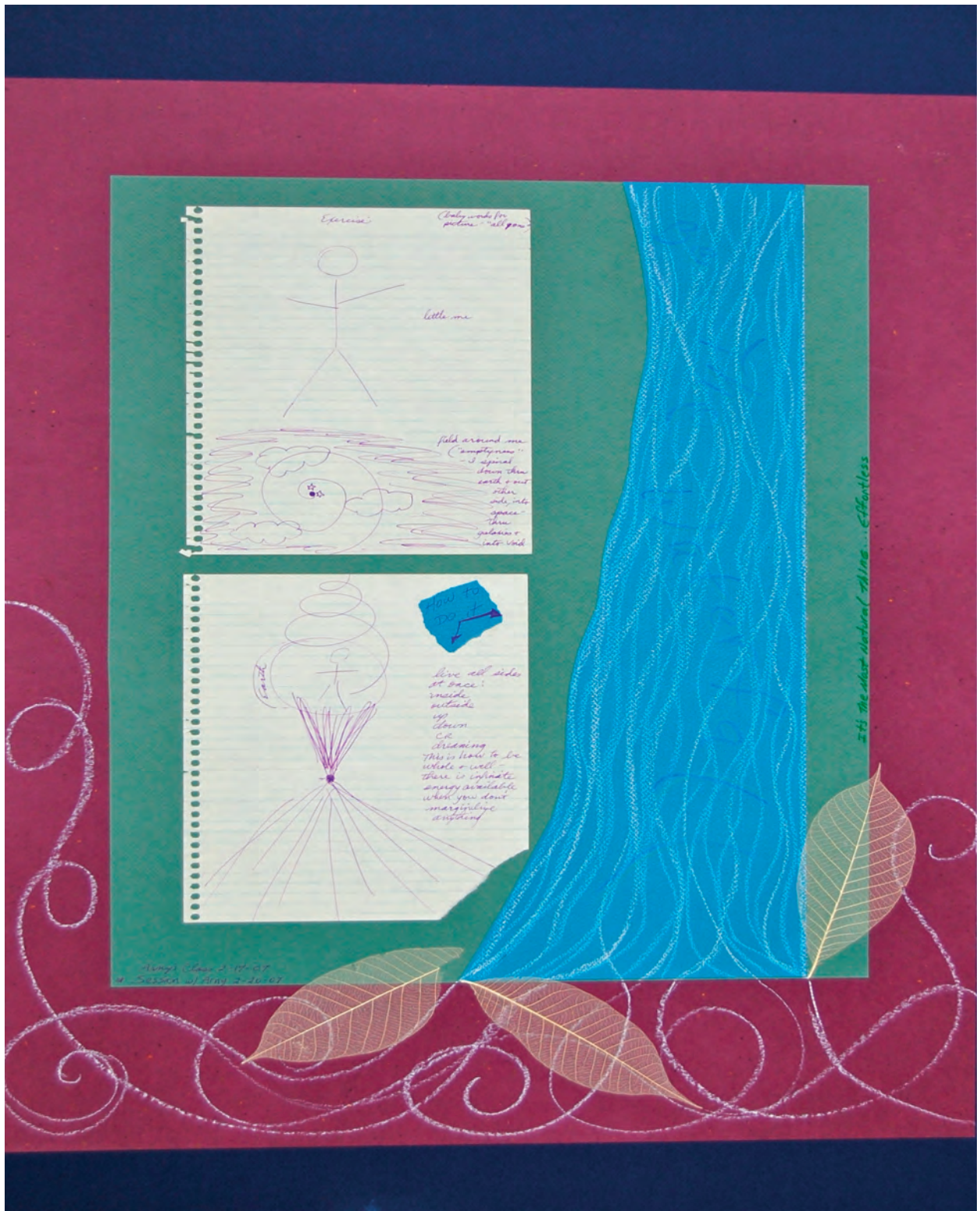
Then one day, a friend who was visiting me admired the orchids that I grow in my home and asked me if it was hard to grow orchids. “It’s easy,” I said, “You just have to...” and I proceeded to list off all the orchids’ needs for a certain strength of light, filtered water, orchid food, special growing mediums, etc. My friend started laughing and declared, “That’s not easy – it’s *overwhelming!*” It didn’t feel overwhelming to me because I love getting to know the plants, and I adore having live flowers bloom in my house. The orchids’ needs had simply become a natural part of my daily life.

I realized it was the same sort of story with my pet cockatiels. I had never planned to live with birds in my house, but I rescued one of them, and then got the other one so the first one would have company. Not liking the idea of birds in cages (or anything in cages for that matter), my birds flew free in the house and happily snuggled up with whomever would let them sit on a shoulder. Until I lived with birds, I had no idea how emotionally sensitive they are, how intelligent they are and how much attention they require, how hard it is to find an experienced avian veterinarian and how frequently parrots require a trip to the vet, how important it is to feed them properly, and generally speaking; how time consuming and expensive it is to take really good care of cockatiels!

I got to thinking about how I had no trouble honoring the various special needs of my orchids, or my birds, and I decided to let my love for them teach me how to love and accept myself; I wanted to care for myself in the same open way that I cared for these beloved but persnickety flowered and feathered friends of mine. Making the collage, and hanging it in my bedroom, reminded me that it's OK to have special needs. My cockatiels, MayMay and Luna, are pictured along with some of the more fussy orchids on the planet.

The word phrases on the collage are identical to the words used in *Status: Exotic, Rare* (on pages 140 and 141)

Becoming The Waterfall

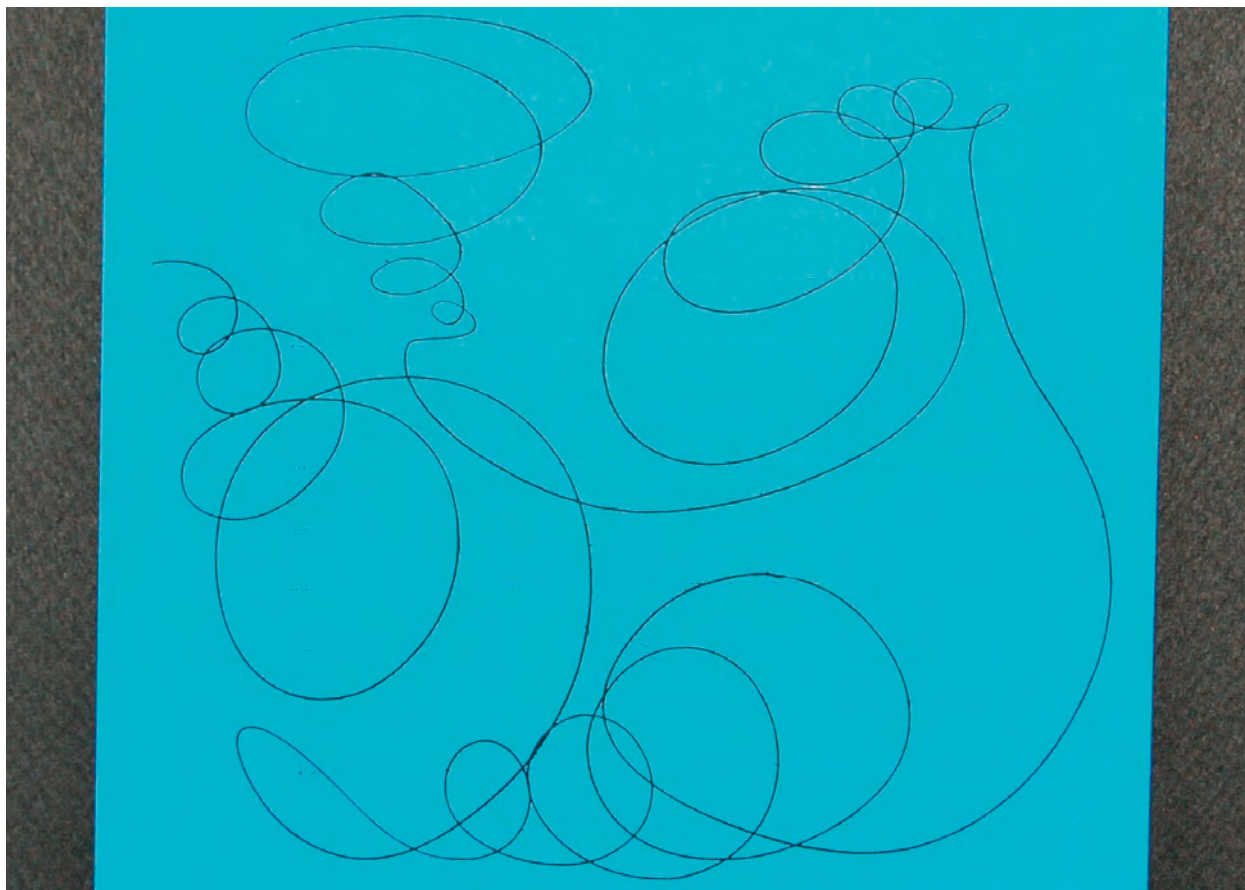


February 2007 (25 x 19 inches. Pages of class notes, oil pastel, leaves, poster board)

Right before I became really ill with chronic fatigue, I was hiking in the Columbia River Gorge, and I came upon a waterfall. I gazed at it in awe and appreciation as I passed by. Suddenly I heard a loud and very powerful voice in my head demanding that I, “Come back!” I realized it was the waterfall speaking to me. I went back and stood by the waterfall and she spoke to me loudly and clearly! She said, “Yours is the power of falling water.” That is all she said in words, but for an hour she taught me by showing me the power of falling water. This experience was one of the most magical and life-changing things that ever happened to me. I just stood there and absorbed her teaching into my cells, feeling waterfall power rushing through my spine, roaring through my blood, and pulsing inside of my ears.

I am extremely grateful that Waterfall came into my life and became one of my big teachers. I am not very good at embodying this kind of power, but I believe Waterfall when she says this power is *me*, so I’ve focused on learning to pick up the qualities of falling water, I’ve learned that waterfall power is about taking the path of least resistance and flowing with the Tao. The notebook pages pasted onto this picture are from a class I had with Army Mindell, in class as part of an exercise, we were supposed to draw ourselves someplace on earth, and I drew myself above the earth, with the words, “I spiral down through earth and out the other side, into space, through galaxies and into the void.” and “This is how to be whole and well; there is infinite energy available when you don’t marginalize anything.” Soon after doing this exercise I felt awful, because I was the only one in a very large class that hadn’t drawn their body *on* the earth. I thought, “I’ve really got a problem. I must be *disassociated* - I’ll just never learn how to really be *here*.” Later during a break in class, I showed these notebook pages to Army and asked him what

I was going to do about my problem with disassociation. He helped me feel OK about it, pointing out that my drawing showed how I should be in relationship to people and things for short periods of time only, and *only* while I'm flowing by. He said the lesson was: *don't get attached, it's OK to be more identified with the cosmos than with human beings.* What a relief this was for me. Then Army asked me what spot on earth most held this atmosphere for me. Instantly I thought of a waterfall, and then I realized this was, in essence, the same message that the Waterfall had given me.

My Dancing Big U

March 2007 (5 x 7 inches. Ballpoint pen on notepaper)

My Big U Tells A Story

The Whirling Dervish Cosmic Energy Dance

Once upon a time there was a Whirling-Dervish-Energy-Spiral.

It never got tired.

Sometimes it would reverse itself –
just because it was a very unpredictable life!

(“No! I hate that!” says the little me.)

It makes me laugh. It makes me laugh and laugh and laugh...

This little scribble shows how my Big U moves, the scribble and the poem came about after doing an exercise called, *Big U Movement and Story*, from Arny Mindell's, *Earth Based Psychology* book. It took me less than five minutes to totally complete this drawing and the accompanying poem. It's amazing that something so quick, easy, and fun to do could express my deep inner struggle so completely and clearly, but it does exactly sum up my perennial struggle not to struggle!

My Big U self is absolutely carefree and joyful no matter what happens. While my little u self gets exhausted worrying and thinking she needs some amount of control and predictability in order to relax, my big U laughs and finds even the little u's antics and dramas are a wonderful thing to behold.

A Seizure



May 2007 (28 x 33 inches. Handmade paper, ribbon, feathers on poster board)

Tracking my life myth through artwork and poetry has deepened and widened my life in many ways. *Jumping Out of My Story* showed me how pain management had taken over my life, and how I let various forms of inner programming dictate my reality. *Support From the Orchids* showed me how it might be possible to just allow myself to be as I am, and how it might be OK to have particular needs and quirks. Throughout the course of this project I had been exploring my emotional and physical pain, and my programming about needing to hide this pain from others. I thought I had uncovered all of my pain's main hiding places, but one day while I was looking through my artwork I noticed that my "top secret" seizures still hadn't been depicted anywhere.

I'd had grand mal seizures regularly for more than ten years without telling anyone. Even my sons didn't know about the seizures because these episodes mostly happened late at night when I was in bed, and even though my husband had witnessed me having seizures, I'd never talked about them with him. I hadn't even identified them as seizures yet; I just thought *this weird thing* happened to my body when I was overloaded from pain and sleeplessness. Until the spring of 2006 (about a year prior to making this picture), the seizures were still a part of my embarrassing, top-secret, middle-of-the-night weirdness.

Then, I was in my doctor's office and one of the procedures prompted me to have a series of seizures right there in front of my doctor, and that's how I found out I have grand mal seizures. I was immediately put on medication, so I rarely have them anymore. The funny thing is that my husband knew all along that I was having seizures, and so he also assumed that I was under medical care for them (since I ingest scads of pills and medicines each day, and visit doctors regularly) and he also assumed that I didn't want to

speaking about my seizures, since I had never spoken of them. Once again, the atmosphere of secrecy I'd created around my body symptoms ruled the house, and in this case, my secrecy had prevented my access to much needed medical care for managing the seizures.

My inner experience of having a seizure is very different than what someone sees from the outside. Like a split-second warning: I experience a mild electrical current running quickly up my spine and out through my limbs, and then immediately afterwards I feel intense bolts of white-hot lightening shooting around in my brain. Then I feel like I'm the sky above a mountain top, and a crazy electrical storm is raging in me, and striking the mountain, some of the wilder bolts spike down my torso or through my legs, and it feels like I'm being electrocuted! A strange juxtaposition is that as soon as I feel a seizure coming on (the half second warning during the mild electrical current sensation), I have learned to completely relax and go limp all over, in order to be less sore afterwards (my spine and muscles get really sore and tight for days after a seizure). With my practiced ability to relax on some level during a seizure, I've come to imagine it as a way of holding the electrical jolts inside a bed of floating feathers – this is like being the whole sky so that I can hold the electrical storm without it ripping me apart. This is why the picture has feathers in the black void surrounding the seizure – the black is the big night sky and the feathers are how I hold it all lightly; without grabbing onto anything, I hold the lightening storm in feathers, and the feathers are held by the vast emptiness of space. This picture is as close as I can get to describing my experience of seizures.

It was very scary for me to make a picture of a seizure for all to see, and even after I completed it, it still took me a couple of weeks to get up the nerve to bring my picture out of hiding. Seizures had always been a private and shameful experience for me,

because they involve a complete loss of control, and a very extreme altered state. Once I got up the courage to ask my husband how I looked while I was having a seizure and he described my eyes rolling up, my back arching, my limbs slamming the floor, and weird noises coming out of my throat, it was even more embarrassing to admit that seizures had been a regular part of my life for a very long time. Eventually, I showed this picture to my mother and to my sons, and I told them about the secret I had kept for so many years. This sharing turned out to be a positive experience that brought us all closer together.

Life Myth Mandala

June 2007 (29 x 29 inches. Felt-tip pens, watercolor paper, colored paper, acrylic paint)

Life Myth Mandala – Detail Of Two-Headed Dragon



June 2007 (Close-up detail of the bottom portion of the mandala)

How It Is

Form
And the form-less

One.

Me
And the not-me

One.

Suffering
And bliss

One.

Knowing
And not knowing

One.

Before the beginning
Beyond eternity
Beyond duality
And unity

Before One

Before

Zero

This.

On June of 2007, I sat down at my computer to finally begin writing about my project. I was happily thinking that, after creating twenty-five pictures, I was now done with the art-making phase of things and ready for the next step: making sense of it all by writing the essay. For some reason, I couldn't think of anything to type, so I sat in front of my computer with my eyes closed and let my mind get empty as I waited for inspiration to come. Ah-ha! After a couple of minutes I realized that I wasn't done yet; there was still one more picture waiting to be made. What was it? I had no idea, so I closed my eyes again and waited a few seconds. Then I suddenly knew: I needed to make a mandala that combined all the elements and symbols from my other pieces.

Wow! This felt exciting - and daunting. I began thinking like crazy: I could begin by lining up all my pictures and cataloging the symbols, and then I could mathematically figure out how to fit it all into one circle to form a mandala. My mind raced as I tried to imagine the proper placement for each symbol; there were so many! Should I sort them according to importance, size, or chronology? My thoughts were taking me in a totally new direction; I'd expected to write about the pieces I'd already created, but instead I was going to create another piece. It was thrilling to imagine my life as a mandala, and to now think about my last piece being a *life myth mandala*. I planned to synthesize all the insights from the project and explore how all the symbols related to one another, and I anticipated making several rough sketches of a mandala in order to work on the layout or type of design that I would use. I got a pencil and some paper, and placed my pencil in the center of the page. Then I simply waited for something to move me. Oh, silly little me!

All of my poems and all my other artwork had come directly out of altered states or strong dreaming states, and had effortlessly *made themselves*, so why did I think I would create my very last piece by using my linear mind to carefully plan things out? It turned out that making the mandala would not be any different from making my previous drawings; when I just let go of any thoughts or ideas and allowed my consensus reality awareness to disappear - my pencil touched the paper, and the mandala quickly created itself. The pencil sketch was finished in half an hour, but I wanted to add in some color so I grabbed a set of inexpensive children's felt-tip pens that I got at the dollar store and I filled in the details of the mandala with color.

Several hours later I felt nearly done, when suddenly I realized that this was no rough preliminary layout – *this was* the mandala! When I took a good look at the drawing it spoke to me in such a powerful way that I fell in love with my mandala, and I just wanted to sit and gaze at it forever! I wasn't quite done with it though because I still needed to add color to the StarBear (the felt pens were too thick for adding color details to the bear's fur), and I also needed to finish the dragon that surrounded the mandala. I knew that the dragon would take the longest to complete because the faces needed to be just right in order for it to feel like the two-headed dragon in my *dragon-wind* vision. I didn't want to rush things; I wanted to allow myself to get empty and let the rest of the mandala come through me without time constraints from the consensus reality world, so I set the mandala aside in order to attend to my everyday commitments. I left it unfinished for several days as I saw clients, attended classes, shopped for groceries, etc., but all the while I was longing to finish my beloved mandala.

At an art supply store I bought some fine tipped indelible felt pens so I could add detail to the bear's fur, and I asked how to keep the other cheaper felt pen that I'd already used, from fading over time. Sadly, I found out that there was no way to prevent fading and these other felt pens would surely fade! So I ordered UV protective glass and a frame to help preserve my mandala a bit longer. I also dug through my art supply closet to find just the right scraps of some hand-dyed paper I'd made, so I could fill in the dragon.

After a few days, I couldn't stand it any longer – I had to finish the mandala! After dinner I set aside time to work on it. The StarBear went quickly, but I worked on the dragon for many hours. When I thought I'd finished putting all the color and details into the mandala, I stood back and looked at it from a distance. The main mandala was very vivid and colorful, but the dragon surrounding it looked faded, so I mixed up some vibrant acrylic paints and got back to work using a tiny brush. This brush was *really* tiny because I actually cut most of the hairs out of an already tiny brush, so that I ended up using a brush with only about five or six little hairs in it! I added small details to the body and faces of my two-headed dragon. The first stage of my night's work (finishing the bear and filling in the dragon) had taken six hours, and this second stage (layering tiny dots on the dragon) took me another four hours, yet time flew by so quickly that it all seemed to take only an hour or two.

I must have needed to paint the tiny details on my dragon in order to get intimately acquainted with the essence of its essence nature. The dragon I saw in my dragon-wind vision was made entirely of light particles and was not a solid form, so making tiny dots to cover my mandala-dragon was the perfect way to embed it with light particles and bring it to life on the paper. This was also the perfect way to bring the

essence of the dragon to the attention of my everyday mind; after focusing intently on the tiniest details of the dragon's heads and body for all those hours, my mind could really understand what the nature and power of this dragon was all about. I felt pure joy and a deep peace while working on my special dragon friend.

When people look at my mandala, it usually takes them awhile to notice the dragon. The nature of this dragon is not flamboyant, it does not seek attention, and yet it is made of the pure life-force energy that holds everything else together; this is why it encircles my mandala – the two-headed dragon enables my life to exist within the world of form. I think we all tend to become mesmerized by the world of *things*, while we fail to connect intimately with their source, my dragon reminds me of this problem (and its solution).

My life myth mandala paints a clear picture of my life journey as told from both the dreaming and the essence level worlds, and it has the profound effect of creating a mystical order out of the seemingly opposing forces in my everyday life. It reveals something new to me every time I look at it, and the images in the mandala teach me how to integrate all of my awareness into one congruent whole. I predict that this mandala will be my life-long teacher as it continues to offer me a clearer understanding of who I am, how to feel well in the world, and what it is that I have to offer to others.

Chapter 7: Learnings, Contributions, And Future Directions

A New Understanding Of Wholeness

As far back as I can remember, I've felt torn between identifying with the material world (*the everything*) on the one hand, and with the formless void (*the nothing*) on the other hand. Because I have a body moving around in a material world, I naturally experience *the everything*, and because I have altered state experiences that take me into the mystical void, I naturally experience *the nothing*. I dearly love this physical world; I love people, animals, and nature, and I love to garden, dance, philosophize, and laugh and cry with friends and family. But the place where I feel absolutely and completely at home, is in the mystical world of my altered states, and most especially when I melt into the endless peace, wisdom, and unconditional love of *the nothing*. My life long dilemma has been that I've experienced very little natural flow between my great love of the physical world, and my great *at-homeness* in the mystical world. My experiences bounce back and forth between these two realities, until often times, my life has felt like a confusing and oppressive dual-identity existence. For years I've wondered, "if it is at all possible to live the dreamingbody in the real world. Is the path of heart only attainable when you are alone, with a master, or in therapy? Can it be lived in the city?" (Mindell, 1993, p.144).

Through many years of working on this project, I've come to a new understanding of wholeness. I have seen that my path of heart can be found in city streets, and that my altered and consensus reality states do actually exist in one seamless and circular flow. My in depth exploration of my altered states, chronic body symptoms, childhood dream,

and creative explorations has brought me closer to my life myth pattern and showed me that it is possible to follow my path of heart under any circumstances. As it turns out, my path of heart is actually a bridge that connects *the nothing* with *the everything*, and when I walk that path I become *the flow that holds it all*. I am getting more and more comfortable living my path of heart and life myth process. I'm learning to loosen the imaginary boundaries separating my altered and consensus reality states, so that I can flow more easily between and within many worlds, and when I do this, I experience infinitely more peace in my body and in my life.

In a very profound way, this project has also allowed me to recognize the gifts embedded in my symptoms and in suffering; I see now that strong physical and emotional pain has been my most powerful awareness teacher, because when I'm *really suffering* the stakes are extremely high, and at those times it is a matter of sheer survival to be able to take myself from a state of dreading my life, to a state where I am grateful, and happy to be alive. Applying process oriented unfolding methods to my physical and emotional pain and studying how the characteristics of my suffering relates to my life myth patterns, has taught me how to access a moment by moment awareness of *what is* - and when I can let go of *what should be*, and melt into *what is*, I am free! When I am free, I am glad to be alive no matter what is going on. Even though I wish my life had been easier, I now feel grateful to my body symptoms for pushing me to find ways of regularly transcending my *little u* identity. Intense chronic pain forces me into the darkness of the void, where the *essence of being* says to me, "Come on in. It's all right. I'll accompany you as you search for the jewel in the darkness," and hidden deep within the shadows of my darkest nights and most severely disturbing symptoms, I have often found the precious jewel of pure

awareness. My chronic symptoms have forced me to develop and pursue my ability to transcend duality and to integrate that transcendence into my consensus reality life. When I can see the pain and fatigue as my quickest path to wholeness, then my symptoms come into perspective within the context of my life myth, and I am able to touch upon the vastness of who I am - and who we all are. At least for a while, until some scary inner critic spooks me and I temporarily lose it all again!

As I continue to integrate my learning from this project, I've noticed some significant changes in my health. In the last several months, my pain levels have gotten lower than they have been in the past twenty years, and I'm sleeping better than I have in the last ten years! This is partly due to the continual fine-tuning of my on-going medical care, and the serendipitous discovery of the *perfect* mattress that enables me to sleep for more hours at a time. However, I mostly attribute these recent and wonderful improvements in my life to the sincere focus I have placed on understanding my life myth and living closer to my own path of heart.

As I begin to take my learning out into the world, I am discovering how to embody my falling-water self while simultaneously interacting with the various people and groups. I am pushing less and flowing more, and my life myth mandala (which hangs prominently in the main room of my home) constantly reminds me that ALL of my parts are needed. My critic can still be quite harsh and one-sided, but it doesn't hold other parts of me hostage for as long as it used to, and I can even recognize the critic's important role in my life as a persistent form of awareness-alarm. I'm appreciating that it takes the dynamic interplay of all my diverse parts to achieve wholeness, and I'm feeling more and more at peace with the weird, wonderful, and idiosyncratic human being that I am. I'm

also recognizing that *everyone* is a weird, wonderful, and idiosyncratic human being, and that my story is not all that different from anyone else's.

Contributions To Process-Oriented Psychology

This project contributes to the field of process-oriented psychology by offering an in-depth, long-term study of one person's life myth process. While other process-oriented research projects have focused on life myths (Ackermann, 1994 ; Camastral, 1995; Norgaard, 2009), altered states (Schwarz, 1993), chronic body symptoms (Camastral 1995, Zahner, 2002), and creative artistic expressions (Ayre, 1991; Kavahaugh, 2007; Zahner, 2002), few have explored how all of these areas interact together as a process unfolds over time. As a result, this project can be used as a resource for future directions in research in any of these areas.

This project specifically contributes to the normalizing altered states and chronic illness by demonstrating how these experiences carry valuable messages from the dreaming realm, and how they reveal important life myth patterns that can offer meaning and hope to people suffering from chronic pain and inner conflicts of all kinds. The project also offers process-oriented methods for unfolding experiences with awareness, and it contributes to the growing body of work focused on using artistic expressions to explore dreaming paths of awareness, and gain access to the deeper essence level meanings behind seemingly opposing forces.

Future Directions

In the future, I hope to use this project as an ongoing tool for my personal and professional development. On a personal level, I plan to use my learnings from this project as a way of staying close to my life myth and path of heart on a daily basis. I will continue to use artistic explorations to help align me with my life myth dreaming process, and foster a greater daily flow between consensus reality, dreaming, and essence realms. On a more professional level, I hope to eventually turn this research project into a published book that focuses on using process-oriented theory and methods to ease the suffering of people living with chronic pain, and chronic illness. I plan to use the personal explorations outlined in this essay as the foundation of the book and intend to emphasize the advantages of using creative and artistic expression to work with chronic symptoms.

I am currently using my research in my private therapy practice by helping clients unfold their own life myth patterns through artwork, poetry, and storytelling. Together we use dream symbols that emerge from the creative process to further unfold and explore body symptoms, recurring struggles, fears, tendencies, core beliefs, high and low dreams, and relationship issues. I am especially excited about a method I'm currently developing to assist clients in making their own life myth mandalas. I have also begun speaking to groups on such topics as chronic symptoms and altered states, and the benefits of using creative expression as a way to gain more meaning and understanding from these experiences.

Creating a life myth mandala can be a powerful therapeutic process that invites all the parts of a person's path to be seen as integral aspects of one whole and complete picture. The circular nature of a mandala is deeply democratic and celebrates the

ongoing, spontaneous, inevitable, and mandatory dance between various parts of ourselves, as a vital aspect of being alive. By combining mandala making with process-oriented theory, I hope to help people integrate their previously unknown or marginalized identities in order to foster a greater sense of wholeness, ease, and purpose in their lives.

In my research on mandalas, I discovered that in Sanskrit the word *mandala* means essence, circle, or completion, and in Tibetan Buddhist and Tantric traditions a mandala represents levels of the universe that also exist within each person. I discovered that Carl Jung created several mandalas in his lifetime, and even encouraged some of his patients to create mandalas as a therapeutic tool, and Joseph Campbell (1988) believed that “making a mandala is a discipline for pulling all those scattered aspects of your life together, finding a center.” All of these descriptions are congruent with my own experience of mandala making, which I hope to pass on to others.

As I work on developing this method as a therapeutic tool, I’ve found that life myth mandalas have the capacity to illustrate the deep yet subtle layers of interplay between various levels of reality and various aspects of mythical patterns. The first stage of my mandala making method involves the creation of spontaneous artworks and writings. The second stage is focused on identifying recurrent patterns that emerged in those artistic expressions and then condensing them into individual core symbols. The third stage is the creation of a mandala using those condensed core symbols. The fourth and final stage is to view the completed mandala and allow its imagery to provide information on how to view our life experiences as one congruent whole. This last step can be repeated an infinite number of times, and each time the mandala has the capacity to demonstrate something new or different. This method affords a clear, non-threatening

and fun exploration of people's life myth patterns, and the entire process fosters an appreciation for how each part of our lives requires the existence of every other part. This constant dance between parts can be experienced as one complimentary expression of wholeness, within the context of manadala making. As I continue to develop this method over time, I hope to offer an experience of that dance and that wholeness to others.

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