

**A MATTER OF LIFE & DEATH:  
A Personal Journey Toward  
Wholeness**

By Katarzyna Vedah

*Essay written for the exhibition **The Space Within: Polarity's Circle**, 2006.*

## **A Matter of Life and Death:** **A Personal Journey Toward Wholeness**

*It starts with a nosebleed. The blood comes to the surface, an old wound within calling out for attention. I cannot hold the blood back, and it hits the porcelain sink. A gaping black hole of the open drain stares back at me, a dark void. If I am to heal the pain, I must acknowledge it, seek it out. I enter through the black hole, and I am afraid. Within, there is a conflict – a Conflict of Extremes. Spirit versus Matter. Beauty versus Suffering. Human versus Divine. Life versus Death.*

A part of me has always envied people with a thicker skin - those not swayed by the slightest thing - for I myself felt flayed, stripped of mediating boundaries, too sensitive to the point of pain. I saw this sensitivity as a weakness on my part, something to harden with a tough exterior, to numb with addiction. This created a split, a rigid sense of One over the Other. When I could not choose (poised between the denial of Life and the fear of Death) I opted for Stasis.

Stasis was my attempt at equilibrium, but it was a balance that was fixed and rigid. Through various methods of research, I came to learn that Nature does not operate under such a balance, that its equilibrium is achieved through constant movement, change, and adaptation to ever-shifting circumstances.

My first realization into this came through a meditation:

A spiral of galaxies moved toward a central supernova, to then burst out again in a cloud of energy and matter. I watched as the deaths of individual stars created new life for others. Each mini-death of a system fed a larger one and kept the life of galaxies moving, changing. I saw how this interaction, this exchange of matter and energy, was also taking place within my body, with the life and death of cells, the exchange of air, intake of nutrients and expelling of wastes. Life moved, interacted, disintegrated, and integrated once more - it was not held in stasis, as stasis would end life. I saw that each small death was an exchange which regenerated and prolonged life.

I sought to verify this internal experience and intuition with scientific research to further explore the workings of natural systems. Once again, I found that change was a key component of life.

When a system in nature is destabilized by energy or information external to that system,

...the information becomes such a large disturbance that the system can no longer ignore it, then real change is at hand. At this moment, jarred by so much internal disturbance and far from equilibrium, the system will fall apart. In its current form, it cannot deal with the disturbance, so it dissolves. But this disintegration does not signal the death of the system. If a living system can maintain its identity, it can self-organize to a higher level of complexity, a new form of itself that can deal better with the present. In this way, dissipative structures demonstrate that *disorder* can be a source of new *order*, and that growth appears from disequilibrium, not balance.<sup>1</sup>

When it can no longer remain as it is,

the system is at a crossroads, standing poised between death and transformation. In science, this is known technically as a bifurcation point. For us humans, it is known as a moment of great fear, tinged, perhaps, with a faint sense of expectation.<sup>2</sup>

Through the use of intuition and science, I came to understand the idea of life feeding on life, "death in service of life,"<sup>3</sup> and came to recognize myself taking part in this natural cycle. In theory, I could now understand how life paired off with death, change with stability, chaos with order, and that these extremes were not in conflict, but complimentary.

And yet, personally and psychologically, I could not accept my own extremes as complimentary and considered those denied parts of myself as weak, destructive, unpleasant and unnecessary. To continue denying the existence of these Other aspects of myself was a form of Stasis, and it brought on more pain. But seeking to destroy these Other parts would only bring on my own destruction as a whole.

When it came time to confront myself as the most frightening of all beings,<sup>4</sup> it was as though I was coming apart, going crazy, and dying. In his 1989 essay, "Spiritual Emergence and Renewal", John Weir Perry stated "whenever a profound experience of change is about to take place, its harbinger is the motif of death." In order for a transformation to take place, the old self-image must be dismantled and reconfigured into something new, and this can trigger a fearful response to death. Such a transformation can oftentimes feel frightening, even painful.<sup>5</sup>

But as Margaret Wheatley stated in *Leadership and the New Science*, “no rebirth is possible without moving through a dark passage”.<sup>6</sup> I had entered the figurative black hole of myself and fell through its dark tunnel only to come out the other end renewed and refreshed. While a part of me seemed to die on the way down, I had also gained something in the process.

The amalgam of dying, being born and giving birth results in a sense of destruction of the old personality-structure and the birth of a new self. This process bears a striking similarity to the events described through the ages in shamanic initiation, rites of passage, temple mysteries in the ecstatic religions of many ancient and preliterate cultures.<sup>7</sup>

I gained further understanding of the process I was undergoing with research into psychology, mythology and earth-based religions. For me, this research pointed to the importance of reconciling opposing forces, and, on a deeper level, that these opposites were really one energy force taking turns playing two complementary roles. I also gained a greater understanding of the nature of my own suffering, that feeling pain was not necessarily a negative condition and something to avoid when it simply acts to signal the need for change.

In his essay on shamanism, Holger Kalweit writes,

According to the modern view illness disrupts and endangers life, whereas the shaman experiences his sickness as a call to destroy this life within himself so as to hear, see, and live it more fully and completely in a higher state of awareness.<sup>8</sup>

In my case, my initial pain stemmed from cutting myself off from essential parts of myself, parts that once integrated, ensured my further survival. Taking notice of my own pain led to a greater awareness of how I needed to change and therefore preserve myself, to continue to live with an enhanced capacity for health and vitality.

## **ENDNOTES**

---

<sup>1</sup> Margaret J. Wheatley. *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Gold. *Navajo & Tibetan Sacred Wisdom: The Circle of the Spirit*. (Vermont: Inner Traditions, Rochester, 1994), 187.

<sup>4</sup> Starhawk. *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco. A Division of HarperCollins Publishers, 1979), 43.

<sup>5</sup> John Weir Perry, M.D. "Spiritual Emergence and Renewal", *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis*. Ed. Stanislav and Christina Grof. (New York: A Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam Book published by G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1989), 65, 67.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret J. Wheatley. *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999), 172.

<sup>7</sup> Stanislav and Christina Grof. *Beyond Death: The Gates of Consciousness*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 26.

<sup>8</sup> Holger Kalweit. "When Insanity is a Blessing: The Message of Shamanism", *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis*. Ed. by Stanislav and Christina Grof. (New York: A Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam Book published by G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1989), 95.

---

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Arrien, Angeles, Ph.D. *The Four-Fold Way: Walking the Path of the Warrior, Teacher, Healer and Visionary*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.

Ball, Philip. *The Self-Made Tapestry: Pattern formation in nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Campbell, Joseph. *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation*. Novato: New World Library, 2004.

Gawain, Shakti. *Living in the Light: A Guide to Personal and Planetary Transformation*. Mill Valley: Nataraj Publishing, 1986.

Gawain, Shakti. *The Path of Transformation: How Healing Ourselves Can Change the World*. Novato: Nataraj Publishing, 2000.

Gold, Peter. *Navajo & Tibetan Sacred Wisdom: The Circle of the Spirit*. Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1994.

Grof, Stanislav and Christina. *Beyond Death: The Gates of Consciousness*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1980.

Kalweit, Holger. "When Insanity is a Blessing: The Message of Shamanism", *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis*. Ed. by Stanislav Grof, M.D. and Christina Grof. New York: A Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam Book published by G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1989.

Perry, John Weir, M.D. "Spiritual Emergence and Renewal", *Spiritual Emergency: When Personal Transformation Becomes a Crisis*. Ed. by Stanislav Grof, M.D. and Christina Grof. New York: A Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam Book published by G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1989.

Pink, Daniel H. *A Whole New Mind: Moving from the Information Age to the Conceptual Age*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005.

Starhawk. *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco/ A Division of HarperCollins Publishers, 1979.

Ward, Mark. *Beyond Chaos: The Underlying Theory Behind Life, the Universe, and Everything*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, an imprint of St. Martin's Press, 2001.

Wheatley, Margaret J. *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1999.

Wolf, Fred Alan, Ph.D. *The Spiritual Universe: One physicist's vision of spirit, soul, matter, and self*. Portsmouth: Moment Point Press, 1999.