How the journey of soul initiation can influence agency and leadership in a time of global change
by Georgia Wingfield-Hayes

INTRODUCTION
In 2016/17 I attended a Year-Long programme in the USA run by the Animas Valley Institute and guided by it’s founder Bill Plotkin. The program was entitled a ‘Year-Long Soul Immersion: Cultivating Artistry and Leadership in a time of global change.’

This ‘Year-Long’ (as I will refer to it) could be compared to an Aboriginal Walkabout. A time outside of culture, exploring the knowing of oneself in relation to the more-than-human world (Plotkin 2003, Cheetham 2005), where feeling lost isn’t just normal but necessary. It is the disintegration of one’s former identity and the allowing of something new to arise, what Plotkin refers to as our mythopoetic identity (Plotkin 2003). Unlike ego-based psychologies, which seek to ‘fix’ a person in their cultural context, this mystical-psychology is about the undoing of the self (Cheetham 2015).

The Year-Long could be called a right of passage. Plotkin’s methods are based on ancient Greek philosophies and akin to those of Native American cultures. Plotkin describes ours as a ‘forever 21 culture,’ this right of passage therefore being a the journey into true adulthood, from an ego-centric to an eco-centric way of being. Plotkin describes 8 stages of a human life (see appendix 1), each one a “psycho-spiritual shift in our centre of gravity” however our culture in Plotkin’s view, generally only recognises 3: birth, death and puberty (Plotkin 2015).

I chose to undertake this Year-Long because I felt lost in my life. I knew what I did not want to do anymore, but had no idea what direction I wanted to take going forward. I was adrift and felt called to this deeper exploration of the self.

The feeling of being lost in my life had been going on for a number of years. Enrolling on the Post Graduate Certificate (PGC) with The Institute for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS) in 2014, was part of this exploration. The early part of that course had had a profound effect on me and lead me to deeply question purpose as well as what sustainability and leadership really mean. This is my Independent Study for the PGC which I have chosen to use as a method of deconstructing and understanding my experience on the Year-Long. The combination of an academic lens on an esoteric journey has been an extremely rich and fulfilling enquiry, and has aided a deeper understanding of myself.

This essay therefore is an exploration of the transformative nature of the Year-Long through the lens of my own experience, and a discussion of how this might inform leadership in the light of the current joint environment crises of climate change and biodiversity loss.
METHODOLOGY
Action research (Sanford 1981); living theory ((Whitehead 1989); and personal construct theory (Bannister 1981), all make a number of core points: the researcher cannot not affect outcomes; the researcher is as much subject and object, as the topic being researched; that initial loose thoughts and imaginings, turn into ideas, that turn into theories and then the process starts over again.

Hieronymus Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights

My reaction to all these methodologies is two fold: they are reminiscent of the natural process that has occurred in this Year-Long, but also that they are trying to create a linear narrative for something as complex as Hieronymus Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights. These frameworks feel freeing yet equally stifling. There is a certain reductionist approach within them all which does not allow for my natural feminine way of wishing to follow instinct, imagination and feelings. It brings up a strong urge to claim ground for the validity of windows of knowing other than reductionist science. I want to wriggle out of the straight-jacket of linear methodologies and explore the non-linear, the non-literal, the immeasurable.

There is such a loss of joy, living only in a world we understand1

Auto-ethnography offers a reflexive approach for examining how we experience the world by looking outward at the world and then inward at the self (Nicol 2012). But this too is an insufficient framework for the profound psychological journey my Year-Long would take me on. Tom Cheetham, speaking about modern education, expresses my feelings about these methodologies when he says, “it has been a long time since most of us have experienced the world. We experience instead a constriction, a selection. We step cautiously out, checking our selves at first, against: What Is Allowed, What Is Known To Be True” (Cheetham 2005).

1 Words that came to me one day while driving my car.
Finally I found the work of research psychologist Robert Romanyshyn and his book “The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind”. Romanyshyn cites Henri Corbin’s 3 ways of knowing:

A - Theoretical attainment - you have heard about the concept of fire  
B - Certainty of the eyewitness - you have seen and been in the presence of fire  
C - Gnosis, in which certainty is lived - to become fire

I needed a framework that could encompass gnosis because metaphorically becoming fire was what this journey would facilitate. Romanyshyn framework of Alchemical Hermeneutics has it’s home in the field of depth psychology, because it allows for the exploration of the gap between what is conscious and unconscious, said and unsaid. It makes space for ‘non-traditional’ modes of knowing such as feelings, dreams, symptoms, intuition and synchronicities, alongside a researcher’s ideas, observations and measurements” (Romanyshyn 2013). His is a framework that goes beyond the duality of subject-object. Within that duality there is a withdrawal of participation (Cheetham 2005). This journey was the opposite of withdrawing from the world, it was an absolute letting go into it.

Alchemical Hermeneutics
Hermeneutics is the method used to research religious texts who’s meanings are ambiguous, and therefore require interpretation, however, it is also seen as essential in the exploration of phenomenology (Bortoft 2012). Richard Rorty writes that hermeneutical discourse is “supposed to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings” (Fisher 2013). Alchemy too, speaks of a process of transformation. Alchemical hermeneutics (AH) therefore is a framework through which to interpret new extra-ordinary personal experiences, while tracking how they transform us.

People are often called to the work they do, because of their own personal story, Romanyshyn cites an example of the psychiatrist Kay R. Jamison who, having written a book on manic depression then wrote a separate memoir ‘An Unquiet Mind’ about her family history of mental illness. She had been forced by scientific method to try and separate the inseparable. She now brings this personal history into her professional work.

Romanysyn calls the personal history of the researcher the ‘wound’. Plotkin similarly speaks of a ‘sacred-wound,’ both seeing this as that which brings us to our life’s work.

“Re-search as a vocation is a journey of transformation. What the knower comes to know changes who the knower is. It is an alchemical process in which one knows only insofar as one lets oneself be known, a process that is an Orphic dismemberment of the researcher by the work that has called her or him into its service.” R. D. Romanysyn

Orpheus’s second and ultimate loss of Eurydice, tears him apart. He is dismembered, but the myth also tells us that this dismemberment is the condition of his transformation. The wounded researcher is supposed to go down into the abyss. Mourning therefore is part of the process. “Research often begins with awakening to loss, as the origins of depth psychology indicate” (Romanysyn 2013).

I experienced this mourning in the writing of this piece. As I delved back into my journals from the Year-Long it was like the process began again, I found myself experiencing an immense sense of grief. It took a few weeks to understand that this was a reawakening to what Romanysyn calls the yet-to-be-done aspects of the work.

Confession of a wounded researcher
In order then for this work to make sense it needs this contextual frame. “In this place the wounded researcher is in-between research as personal confession and distant observation. Embodying the paradox of detached involvement” (Romanysyn 2013).
This confession is painful to make, not because the wound is sore, it is in fact largely healed but simply it pains me to speak of my family, whom I love dearly, in a way that could be construed as blame. Nevertheless, it has become clear through the process of my writing in the light of AH that the past has absolutely dictated the course of my inquiries, and therefore the confession is necessary.

The cause of the wound: a father who’s love was in transaction for his control; two older brothers and a culture of cruelty between siblings; a loving mother who nevertheless wielded her own brand of cruel judgement, and who died when I was 22. The resulting wound: a lack in development of a personal sense of power, and autonomy.

A secondary wound was caused by an entirely science-based education, with the resulting perspective of science being the only valid window of knowing. All in all, these wounds created a kind of Stockholm Syndrome to masculine and scientific authority.

The gift of these wounds: deep insights into how the ‘natural feminine way’ is repressed culturally, and how patriarchal, scientistic constructs become internalised by us individually. The resulting work: how I/we may rediscover the power of the “natural feminine way.” Something which in my view has been lost to our culture for millennia.

This identification of the ‘wound’ has occurred retrospectively. I knew of it’s existence, but it would have been disadvantageous to identify it with such exactitude before or even during the Year-Long, as this would have detracted from the open nature of my inquiry.

Alchemical Hermeneutics - A Methodology for Writing down the Soul - 4 ways of looking (Romanyshyn 2013).

1. Writing as creative repetition. Revisiting the work repeatedly, to pick up what is undone when we have got too far ahead of the work.
2. Elegiac writing. In the ‘gap’ we discover a sense of sadness, a feeling of mourning, not only for what slips the net of our intentions, but also what has been lost, forgotten, left behind or abandoned and yet haunts our efforts to know the world and ourselves, and to say what we know.
3. Cultivating a metaphoric sensibility. In order to attend to the in-between spaces, we need a language of metaphor. Alchemy-of-metaphor lies in this tension between holding on to meaning and letting go of it at the same time. Metaphors can only come from embodied experiences.
4. Giving voice and body to the work. To write in a way that you feel the words. “Language is an intervention into psychology, not a neutral medium for it” Susan Rowland. A poetic cadence facilitates a more felt experience from the language. “Does what you write resonate in your body and not just make sense in your mind?”

“Anything derived merely from rationality risks being profoundly inauthentic unless it also bears witness to the destabilising presence of the unconscious” Susan Rowland, (Romanyshyn 2013).

AH may not be for everyone. This seemingly structureless approach may be too free for some people and some situations, but for self enquiry in relation to nature this is the only framework I have come across that is sufficiently freeing. In this, the field of ecopsychology, the subject matter “is neither the human nor the natural, but the lived experience of interrelationships between the two” (Fisher 2013).

“We can only begin with our noticings, and with the acutely discriminative sense that we can have of their qualitative nature” (Bortoft 2012). AH is an excellent mode of inquiry for tracking such “noticings.” It is non-linear, because it encompasses noticing in every sphere, from dreams to what

Stockholm Syndrome - a condition that causes hostages to develop a psychological alliance with their captors as a survival strategy during captivity.
nature may reflect to us about our inner world, and how all these threads inform each other and alter the noticer. This approach is in fact entirely immersive and endlessly expansive. One is taken by the tide of experience and all one can do is hold onto the threads of ones noticings.

As is often the case poetry says it best, maybe because as the poet David Whyte puts it, “poetry is the language against which we have no defence” (David Whyte 2016).

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I live my life in widening circles 
that reach out across the world. 
I may not complete this last one 
but I give myself to it.

I circle around... the primordial tower. 
I've been circling for thousands of years 
and I still don't know: am I a falcon, 
a storm, or a great song?

Rainer Maria Rilke

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THE JOURNEY BEGINS

“I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change, I thought that with 30 years of good science we could address those problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy… and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation, and we scientist don’t know how to do that.”

Gus Seth, environmentalist and lawyer.

Gus’s sentiments are close to my own, but I believe just as a river of selfishness, greed and apathy runs under the biggest environmental problems of our day, that in the depths of that river is current which flows with: fear, guilt and shame (Weintrobe 2013); our perception of our being separate from the our world (Eisenstein 2013; Cheetham 2005); and a great well of unresolved grief (Macy & Johnstone 2012). All these waters create both human suffering and our ability to behave in destructive ways towards our planetary home, and each other.

This paper is an exploration of how such a spiritual and cultural transformation might be brought about.

What is soul?

30 years ago, Leotino Balbo a Brazilian sugar farmer wanted to take the state of his farmed soils back to that of the forest. He believed everything else, plant yields, biodiversity and pest control would come from there. He was ridiculed by his peers. However when troubled, he always went to the forest (Balbo 2013).

“I came to these big trees, these masters... to hear what I call the voice of nature, which in fact is my inner voice and this environment just helps to connect myself with myself.”

Leotino Balbo (Balbo 2013)

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3 This quote is widely distributed as an image on the internet, original source unknown. Gus Speth is dean and professor of Environmental Policy and Sustainable Development at Yale University, and a senior fellow at Demos.
This idea, that there is a deeper guidance within us which is relational with nature, is one way to explain the concept of our soul.

Another is in contrast to spirit. James Hillmans writes, “Soul likes intimacy; spirit is uplifting. Spirit sees, even in the dark; soul feels its way, step by step, or needs a dog. Spirit shoots arrows; soul takes them in the chest” (Plotkin 2003).

Many philosophical and spiritual traditions split spirit and soul into the masculine and feminine aspects of reality. Native American cultures speak of father sky and mother earth, European Neolithic pagans, of earth goddesses and heavenly gods. Christianity too, within its Gnostic tradition has the masculine transcendent spirit and feminine receptive soul (Harrington 2018).

“Once one man became the total embodiment of God-made-flesh, the rest of humanity were left looking beyond themselves to a matchless paragon of virtue instead of realising their own Christ-power within” Tom Harpur (Harpur 2004)

This Christ-power within correlates with our concept of soul. The sacred being omnipresent in everything, including ourselves. Unfortunately mainstream Christian doctrine has rendered the ‘sacred’ abstract, the only culturally sacred places being those that house its lofty idol, while the rest of ‘creation’ is ours to dominate and desecrate. Culturally we confuse seeing our bodies as sacred for self-worship, rather than the body as the shrine of the soul. “Our body is that piece of wilderness that we carry around with us all the time” (Reason 1998).

Historically Christianity has treated its gnostics as heretics, condemning them to death. Women such as Marguerite Porete who was burnt at the stake in 1310 for her mystical writings (Harrington, 2018). And so the masculine aspect of Christian teachings has prevailed in the church and in our culture.

In his studies of the mystical scholar Henri Corbin, Cheetham describes “Corbin’s contention that European civilisation experienced a ‘metaphysical catastrophe’ as a result of what we might call the Great Disjunction.” This, a catastrophe of perception (as I will discuss later), being “the disappearance of the Anima Mundi, the Soul of the World” (Cheetham 2005).

The patriarchal bias of religion and the limiting perspective of science have jointly detached us from half of who we are, the feminine aspect of being, the soul. I wonder is it here in the embers of heretics that our spiritual and cultural transformation might be sought?

Plotkin too, separates the concepts of spirit and soul. He speaks of our everyday life in the middle world; then the upper world of spirit, one-ness and transcendent experiences; and the underworld of soul, hades and sweet darkness (Plotkin 2013). Exploration of the latter being a rarity not just in modern culture but in the mainstream iterations of the world’s great religions.

Soul immersion
With language we create concepts - stories we tell to make sense of our lives. How we perceive our world, ourselves, and others in it, is all a construct of our familial, cultural and ancestral narratives. These constructs are like a container within which we reside, but also we are that container. Then we grow up, leave home, have new experiences and some of these perspectives shift. In ancient animistic cultures it is at this point that young people are sent out by their elders into the wilderness on walkabout, or vision quest.

Plotkin postulates that we struggle to resolve our culturally created problems from within the culture that created them. In order for new solutions, inspiration and leaders to arise, individuals must take this sort of journey of soul immersion in isolation from their cultural settings (Plotkin 2003).

Part of Plotkin’s approach is to provide a greater container, at first theoretical, to step out into. This container is based in our relationship with the more-than-human world and the world of soul. It
involves exploring our relationship with living creatures, trees, mountains and rivers; but also the imaginal realm, intuitions, numinous experiences and our dreams.

This sort of journey cannot occur if we remain within our community. Dissolution of the self is not only difficult to elicit, but also psychologically dangerous if we remain in our cultural context (Plotkin 2003).

My “Year-Long” Journey

Over 12 months from September 2016 (including 4, week-long meet-ups in the USA), I undertook my walkabout, my time in the wilderness.

The first group meet up was in Aravaipa canyon, Arizona where the focus was on preparation for our decent into the underworld.

![Diagram 1. The phase of the Underworld Journey](image)

**Preparation**

This phase was largely about developing the tools required for the journey: learning to interact with the more-than-human world; developing a lens through which to look upon the world with wonder and awe; befriending the dark; creating self-designed ceremonies - small acts that signify intent; spending time in portals to the underworld - places that are both alluring and frightening, such as caves; using artwork and poetry to express numinous experiences; and above all wandering and getting lost in wild places.

_I wish i knew the beauty of leaves falling,  
to whom are we beautiful as we go,  
sometimes, if you move carefully through the forest,  
breathing like the ones in the old stories,  
who could cross a shimmering bed of leaves without a sound,  
you come to a place whose only task,  
is to trouble you with tiny but frighten requests,  
conceived out of nowhere but in this place beginning to lead everywhere  
requests to stop what you are doing right now, and  
to stop what you are becoming while you do it,  
questions that can make or unmake a life,  
questions that have patiently waited for you,  
questions that have no right to go away._

David Whyte
This preparation phase also involved learning the ongoing process of developing the ‘4 facets of self’ (see appendix 2). Plotkin places 4 archetypes on the compass which can be mapped out on the ground and used in various practices to help facilitate this ‘wholing’ of the self. These archetypes are: in the North - the regenerative adult; the South - the wild indigenous one; the East - the innocent, sage and sacred fool; and in the West - the muse, inner beloved and guide to soul (Plotkin 2013).

**Severance**

As we step out and away from those we know we are severing the relationship with who we, and they, have known us to be. We don’t know who will return.

“Your ego, is not born directly from nature, but rather from the matrix of culture-language-family. Soul initiation is often described as a death and a second birth. Like entering a cocoon, your first ego dies and later a soul-rooted ego is birthed, not from culture this time but from the womb of nature.” (Plotkin 2003)

In those first months my dreams (and those of others in the group) were of death, however our guides took delight, this was apparently to be expected. I had dreams of being hunted down by gunmen; the brakes failing in my car; shooting and burying a body then being found out; and hiring a hitman to kill my father. These would have been terrifying nightmares were it not for our guides counselling, “go back into the dreams, allow the car to crash, yourself to be killed.”

Plotkins uses a Jungian approach to dream work, the ‘others’ in such dreams seen as aspects of the self. The soul eliciting death within the ego (Plotkin 2003).

Soon I did not want to be around people and spent much time wandering in the mountains with rivers, rocks and trees. Underworld consciousness was taking me on a journey. Plotkin encouraged us to look to nature to be our therapist and guide, while our human guides usher us out beyond our previous known limits.

“Awaken your spirit to adventure, hold nothing back. Learn to find ease in risk, soon you will be at home in a new rhythm, for your soul senses the world that awaits you” John O'Donerhue (O'Donerhue 1997)

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**Journal entry, 11 Dec, 2016**

Trees - the inspiration of allowing of absolute risk and fruitful blossoming. They grow where their seed lands. They make no choices. Sometimes precariously placed on a cliff, they just grow! They risk everything, but if not lost, they are ecstatically rewarded with grace and abundance.

**Journal entry, 9 Jan, 2017**

I went to see the film “The Eagle Huntress” last night. A thirteen year old girl, a divine spirit of feminine power, beautiful, self assured and gentle. I awoke feeling like half my life was missing and the world in which I might live it, also missing.
Henri Corbin, counters Descartes’, “I think therefore I am”, with “I am because I am thought by another” (Cheetham, 2015). The last stanza of this poem seems to speak of something similar.

Everything in my life seemed to be falling apart at this time. The project I had been working on ran out of money and I felt lost and ashamed of failure.

Plotkin councils that “surrendering fully to being lost… is an art… By trusting your unknowing, your old standards of progress dissolve and you become eligible to be chosen by new, larger standards, those that come not from your mind or old story or other people, but from the depths of your soul (Plotkin 2017).

Journal entry, 9 Feb, 2017
I feel I don’t know who or what I am anymore, where I am going and I don’t seem to care. I fall and fall, over and over like rain.

Journal entry, 17 Feb 2017
On the train to London to fly to the USA, the train stops short at Wigan station, we have struck a person, a woman has stepped off the platform in front of the train. I see them bring the body bag, to pick up “the debris”.

Journal entry 14 Jan, 2017
Wandering in Eskdale, a poem comes:

The little green tubes of hope
blink in the afternoon sun

They bring promise
of a future wood.

A wilder place in
a time not yet come.

Where buzzards may nest,
deer may shelter.

Red squirrels dance
from branch to branch.

Pine martins too.
But not now, not yet.

On a day
who's dream, dreamed you
This incident really hits me hard, it feels physiologically confusing and dangerous. I am struck by the parallels between this act of suicide and the narratives of my journey to a virtual death. I wonder is suicide actually a craving for this path, with no-one there to guide our young people into these initiations? Plotkin writes of this, comparing our culture with the Dagara people who still send their boys on initiation. Some will die, while the rest attain true adulthood (appendix 3).

Anza Borrego, California
The second meet up with the group is in Anza Borrego State Park. We drive in eight miles and hike another five up into Cougar Canyon. It rains solidly for 24 hours, the creek floods and some of us stay up all night on watch. These few days are extraordinary - the desert full of buds ready to burst. I dream of a deeply depressed pregnant girl and walk amongst the plants, crying at the sight of flowers. In my head are the words ‘they are being allowed to bloom,’ like I am surprised such a thing would happen without permission. When I visit portals my imagination conjures snakes. I speak to one of our guides about this and have a terrifying imaginal experience of snakes in my body, up my spin and in my womb. All is mysterious, frightening and deliciously visceral. I leave feeling like I have been plunged into another world.

Cheetham on Corbin again, “Corbin makes the world so much bigger, so much more alive, and so much more interesting than mine had ever been” (Cheetham 2015). I too was experiencing the opening of this mystical dimension of reality which was making the world of capitalist consumerism seem like a false, monochrome veneer, obscuring the extraordinariness of life.

Journal entry, 30 Mar, 2017
I've been living life from the wrong shore of my being. On this shore confidence is an over priced commodity, on the other, trust takes its place. Trust and the courage to follow it.

Journal entry, 1 April, 2017
You have the choice when truly tested, to say, “I'm prepared to let go of all that I have clung to, my way of being in the world,” and walk into the unknown, because the unknown has come to feel more like home than any of that.

My journal at this time is full of all the ways the constructs of my mind prevent this river crossing. Inside I am a war zone, my dreams speak of deep shame, madness feels the same as sanity. The poetry of David Whyte is a lifeline, in particular The House of Belonging (full poem appendix 4).

This is the temple of my adult aloneness and I belong to that aloneness as I belong to my life
Joanna Macy says we are already home, “nothing can ever separate me from this living earth.” She speaks as Plotkin does of our growing into ever widening circles of our sense of self, from the solitary ego, to the human community, then the more-than-human earth-community (Macy 2018). When we step out to know ourselves in this more-than-human world, at first it can seem a lonely place, but ultimately it is a place in which there is no such thing as being alone.

Something shifts in the period that follows, an ease, a new sense of joy has arisen. A poem comes one morning like a gift passed through the window, carried on the song of robin and thrush.

The world was made
to love
and be loved in.

Song Thrush
exquisite,
calls in
the first light of day.

I lay in bed
of feathers
warmed against the cool
morning air.

Enchantment all around.
Robin,
now joins
this chorused dawn.

To think
I'd learned
to dread
the day.

A sense now,
a silver thread
from childhood
recalled

of wonder,
curiosity,
excitement,
I’m here

To sing
my song
back
into this world

To be enchantress
and enchanted
by this mysterious thing
called life.
There are powerful threads woven through this time: of sensual energies awoken by nature; dreams (such as the one above) of the desire for the death of the ego-centric self; an emerging personal mythology about serpents, associated with a visceral feminine power wanting to break free within me. This power having been suppressed, by men and women, religion and science, the patriarchy living within.

Where a modern mind might put all these threads down to fanciful thinking and coincidence, through hermeneutics we can re-enter what Carl Jung called the primal or natural mind. The mind which seeks a more meaningful explanation because it does not cleave subject from object. For the primal mind “psyche and objectivity coalesce in the external world” (Jung 1931).
This way of seeing is the lens animist cultures naturally view the world through. Those who study Native American languages for example, are struck by the contrast between our noun based language and their verb based languages. They talk about themselves and the world around them as ‘processes’ with no separation between the two, we talk about the world of things, of objects (Haines 2014). Through the animist lens the world is complexity in motion, the seer knowing their work is to maintain stability in the face of that (Cordova 2007).

A similar lens (though less integrated into nature) is found in the mystical teachings of Christianity. Divine intersubjectivity, “the eye with which I see god is the same eye which sees me” Meister Eckhart (Harrington 2018). However our modern empiricist mind assumes authority in this area that it is in fact incapable of considering, and consequently “conveniently elbows the soul out of the picture” (HRH The Prince of Wales 2010). Re-cultivating this lens of intersubjectivity and reclaiming this ground of the soul, might be one of the most important, radical acts of leadership required in this time of great global change.

Journal entry, 16 April, 2017
Reading Jesus and the Goddess (Freke & Gandy 2001) A quote from Augustine leaves me incandescent with rage. “What does it matter whether it is a wife or a mother, it is Eve the temptress we must beware of in any woman.” A realisation sears within me: I carry this judgement! About myself, about other women.

Without thinking I write the quote on a piece of paper, take it to a pitch dark cave in the Lake District and burn it - an exorcism of sorts. I read the quote now and the rage has gone, it has been replaced by understanding and compassion for myself, women, men and for the very long story our ancestors have lived through that has landed us up here, now, in this mess. I wonder, is the snake in the Garden of Eden actually a symbol of feminine power, stripped from Eve? The powerful enchantress turned shameful temptress?

Capitol Reef, Utah. Land of the Sleeping Rainbows, May 2017
These beautiful riven sandstone rocks - the silent hosts to our vision fast: 4 days; no food, only water; the latter 3 alone, with the desert junipers, ponderosa pines and bright spring flowers. “The caterpillar could not have imagined the butterfly” Plotkin tells us.

Solo: Day 1
I suffer the hunger, and battle all day with an intense unidentified fear, all I can do is hide in my sleeping bag. Late in the day I finally glimpse this fear - the persecution of women, for our ways of being and seeing. As if all female persecution through history, is a ghost that haunts me.
Day 2
A new battle, a deep reluctance to be here in this life. The hot sun and cold wind torment me. The wind snaps the cord of my tarp. I sleep the night in the bed of the dry creek, under the stars.
Day 3
Late in the day I feel a call to my death lodge. I fall asleep there and dream: a Jordie man, a taxi driver says, “I’ve come to take you home,” I vision the main road back to my town, but he says “no, not that way, I might get lost.” I awake, but with my eyes still closed I see a kaleidoscope world, snake patterned, I allow myself to be pulled down into their world. I let the wind dance me in that place, and I’m danced into a trance. I’m then overtaken by uncontrollable laughter, accompanied with an immense sense of freedom and power. The power tastes good, I see my ego want to take it for itself. Then I’m overtaken again by intense anger about mans destruction of the earth. Afterwards, I’m completely exhausted, the trance a hazy memory, but I have experienced a whole new dimension of who I am, when I truly come home to myself.
SOME PERSONAL REFLECTION ON THE YEAR-LONG
We are millennia removed from the worship of the feminine, Goddesses and Mother Earth. Originally she was all encompassing: nurturer and destroyer; controller of the mysteries of birth and death. Today witch trials and the burning of female mystics as heretics, heralds the more recent history of our relationship to the sacred feminine (Yarnall 1989).

During this Year-Long journey, it felt like the history of this shift in perspective towards the feminine, was playing out within me; along with a call from deep-time for the feminine, earth, and soul to be held as sacred once more.

The nature feminine way
A woman’s natural way of being has too long been usurped by a patriarchal mythology which lives through us in its place. Women now have the freedom to move beyond this, men no longer hold us back, only we now hold ourselves back. We need to find ways to break the chains of this internalised patriarchy. There is little benefit pointing the finger of blame at men, for this story is what we are all, men and women, born into. It is our received and therefore perceived reality. It is not only women who suffers these chains.

A magnificent power lies within women that is both loving and nurturing, yet ruthlessly protective of all life. It is my belief that one of the most important ways in which change may be brought about is through women (and no doubt men too) coming home to this deeper truth of themselves.

How this experience is changing me
My soul it seems has asked me to step into the unknowingness required to trust in something other than the human mind. Being danced by life, as the wind danced me on my fast, is an important personal metaphor.

In a way this journey has not ended, and probably never will. It continues to manifest in me new ways of being, seeing and understanding the interconnectedness of all things.

The mythic world whether it occurs in an archaic age, a primitive society or a childhood, demands awe and participation. It is not accessible to the person determined to see it clearly and logically by standing back.” Judith Yarnall (Yarnall 1989)

LEADING A SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION
If realising intersubjectivity is part of this transformation, then to speak of being disconnected from nature (Sharmer & Kaufer 2013) is not quite correct. Rather we need to problematise the word nature, as the word itself is part of the deception. This crisis is one of perception (McPhee & Clarke 2014), our perceived separation from the world is itself a sort of mythology, “…the great sweep of Western history as a whole can be read as a story of withdrawal, and the progressive “death of nature,” and the birth of a mechanistic cosmology based on abstract materialism. (Cheetham, 2005).

There is a need for what I call ‘re-imagining’ ourselves back into the more-than-human world. This does not need to be complicated, but does require a stepping out beyond our own preconceptions of what is ‘normal’. Sitting with a tree or river and entering into a conversation. This is an exploration best lead by curiosity and good questions. One question which sat with me for many months on the Year-Long was “what if the world is constantly in conversation with me and I just don’t know how to listen.” Alchemical Hermeneutics is an excellent framework for this exploration.

Leotino Balbo, the Sugar-man of Brazil, still goes to the grand masters of the forest for advice, meanwhile he produces almost all the organic sugar we consume in the UK. He has revolutionised sugar growing making it sustainable, and whats more as intuited 30 years ago, his land yields
higher than that of his conventional neighbours. His plantations are packed with wildlife, invertebrates, birds, even wolves roam his fields of cane (Balbo 2013). Balbo is just one individual leading this regenerative agriculture movement. An emerging approach which understands that only ‘functioning ecosystems’ can support sustainable, healthful food production. The interconnected complexity of the soil ecosystem informs the wellbeing of everything that happens above the ground from biodiversity, to yields and the nutritional quality of the food we grow.

This shift to a holistic perspective in food production requires an entirely different mindset (Savory & Butterfield 2016). One where control over nature is superseded by a trust in, and understanding of nature. The food industry’s inherent dependence on the earth and her natural processes makes this a good place to look for the emergence of new forms of leadership which can inspire how we might behave in environments other than agriculture.

Otto Sharmer and his work with Theory U talks of the shift from ego to eco-based economies, business and societies as requiring ‘ecosystem awareness’ and our looking beyond symptoms to the root causes of problems. For this Sharmer says, “leaders need to master a new social technology in opening not just our minds, but also our hearts and our will”. Scharmer speaks of 4 levels of listening and how we need to cultivate the higher levels in order to foster change (Scharmer & Kaufer 2013).

1. **Downloading** - reconfirming what we already know. Projecting our bias onto the world.
2. **Factual listening** - accessing the open mind, notice disconfirming data. The lens of science.
3. **Empathic listening** - Listening with an open heart as an organ of perception. Emotional connection. Listening to where the ‘other person’ is speaking from, not filtering through our preconceptions.
4. **Generative listening** - requires us to connect with our open will - the source of who we are. Like a great coach, who recognises another’s emerging future self.

Sharmer’s shift from ego to eco chimes with Plotkin’s shift from an ego to soul-centric way of being; as does empathic and generative listening, with intersubjectivity. Plotkin just broadens the net even further, encompassing listening beyond the human dimension.

Within the human dimension these more integral ways of listening can break down boundaries between seemingly irreconcilable parties. Francine Madden’s work on wildlife conflict resolution in the State of Washington, where wolves are being allowed to return from Canada and Idaho, is an excellent example of such listening in action. By working with individuals from the tripartite of hunters, ranchers and conservationists, she has managed to re-draw the dividing lines from between these three groups to within them. A core from all three now working together with joint aims (Madden 2015).

The work of people such as Francine Maddon - in ‘the gap’ between seemingly irreconcilable parties is of great interest to me. In my own work in the field of regenerative agriculture here in the Lake District I witness a great divide between the farming and conservation communities. Farmers are angry and many conservations scared of farmers and angry at them in return for their threatening behaviour. I have had conversations with conservationists about our need to understand the psychological situation of hill farmers and cultivate empathy for them in order to work with them constructively. But the reaction to this is usually also one of anger.

This work interested me but I have become aware of how conflict averse I have been most of my life. Over the last few years I have identified how I only had 4 ways of dealing with people in conflicting situations: to hide (literally or metaphorically), run away, acquiesce or oppose. In my journals over the Year-Long I have written about my need to develop a fifth way - an inner resilience and sense of personal power and autonomy in order to deal with these situations constructively.
In the writing of this essay I had a lightbulb moment when I realised I am probably not alone in this problem of conflict aversion and that my personal insight might be of value in the development of my own work in ‘the gap’.

**The Fifth Way**

My childhood facilitated my learning just 4 ways of reacting to actual or perceived control by another person. The 4 red houses (see diagram 2) of: guilt & shame, fear & anxiety, depression, and anger, are where I spent much of my early years - a lonely place to be. As the diagram demonstrates the ‘green’ Fifth Way allows us to connect with each other, our grief, our capacity to experience generative emotional states and the ability to build relationships and facilitate meaningful change.

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**Diagram 2. The Fifth Way**

Using the Fifth Way as a map for situations such as the one here in the Lake District, we can see that the external control experienced by hill farmers from subsidies and set pricing, means their locus of control is inherently external before conservationists even enter the mix. Maybe this is a clue to the high rate of depression and suicide in farmers.

In Tanzania when villagers forced a group of elephant off a cliff, the motives “seem simple: protecting people and their property. Scratch a little deeper though.., and it becomes clear that the animals are often just convenient scapegoats. The real hatred is reserved for conservationists and government officials” (Piotrowski 2015). Francine Maddon say we need to stop imposing conservation on communities and involved local people in decision making (Piotrowski 2015).
Beyond the eco-echo chamber
If we are to create change we have to start working beyond the eco-echo chamber. If conservationists are going to create lasting change they are going to have to bring empathic and generative listening to the table. But to do this requires a better understanding of the self.

“If we want to bear witness to the sea change towards lasting, sustainable, social transformation, we cannot afford to consider doing inner work to be a choice for those that do social work. We must make them synonymous. It is the inner life of the individual that expresses itself through community, and communities give rise to society.”

Rev. angel Kyodo Williams

Social constructed ways of being are like a container within which we reside, but also we are that container. If we don’t change ourselves nothing will change in our culture. Without doing our inner work we just recreate the old systems in a new guise. As Gabor Mate once said “What is capitalism? It is the exploitation of man by man. What is Communism? It is the opposite” (Wingfield-Hayes 2014).

Spiritual, cultural transformation
The word ‘spiritual’ more often than not acts as a red-rag to the bull of the scientific mind. But perhaps spirituality is simply the realm beyond which the empirical, rational mind has access. Martin Heidegger, one of the founders of the concept of phenomenology, said that “reality was best understood through the individual subjective experience of the world’s phenomena, and that representationist thinking was itself delusional” (Harrington 2018).

“To come into a deep knowing of who we are, is the stuff that bringing down systems of oppression is made of. Capitalism couldn’t survive, patriarchy couldn’t survive, white supremacy couldn’t survive if enough of us set about reclaiming the human spirit, which includes reclaiming a sense of humanity for those people that are the current vehicles for such forms of oppression” angel Kyodo Williams (Williams 2018).

Williams words provide me with hope. Going back to the ‘Fifth Way’ for a moment, what I learned in my time as a therapist is that red zone emotions (diagram 2) can only be transformed if witnessed from a place of non-judgement. We can be the witness to our own red zone emotions and we can be the witness of that for each other through Sharmer’s empathic, generative listening.

If however we remain defiant, we push each other into the red, and become like repelling magnets. Globally we see an accentuation of this polarised dualism. Now more than ever we need to understand what creates this. Unhealthy forms of leadership, power and domination are born out of the red zone. When Williams says we have to reclaim a “sense of humanity for those people, that are the current vehicles for such forms of oppression,” empathic and generative listening is what is required. This broader perspective allows us to see that we are all psychologically damaged and if we do not work on stepping into the green and finding empathy and understanding for each others, then the results will always conflict.

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4 Rev. angel Kyodo Williams is a Zen teacher, and founder of Centre for Transformative Change. This quote is from the website transformativechange.org
CONCLUSION
It is not uncommon, when I talk to scientists in particular, to find the encounter deeply uncomfortable because of what I can only describe as soullessness. It feels like my own soul is being sucked out of me and I want to get away from that person as quickly as possible. The scientific education that these people have been through has indoctrinated them so deeply with an empirical, rational and reductionist mindset it seems, that anything other than this mechanistic world view has died a death in them. I believe it is no coincidence that our world too is dying a death around us. We are sleep-walking into our planet’s 6th mass extinction, yet the very scientists who wish to save the planet are largely walking a soulless path. This “mechanistic world view has brought us to the brink of catastrophe” (Harding 2006). Reductionist science is that mechanistic world view, it teaches scientist to be dispassionate and disconnected.

“Evernden says - for activists to adopt a technocratic language and method is actually to betray their own cause; for it converts nature into voiceless objects to be managed for human utility, nothing more. He urges the environmentalist, then, not to accept “beliefs that trivialise the experience of living and assert the reality of a valueless world,” but to “attest to his own experience of a meaningful, valuable, colourful world”” (Fisher 2013).

I am reminded of a workshop I attended on Natural Capital and Ecosystem Services - where everyone in the room (mostly conservationists) were stuck on how to express the importance of the inexpressible - our love, connection and need for the more-than-human world to be healthy and vibrant all around us, not just a commodity to exploit, or protect because it serves our requirements. None of us had the ability to express the worth of this in a way that could measure up against this commoditised version of the natural world.

If we don’t find value first in the non-literal and the immeasurable, before bringing measurable value into play, we will always loose what is precious to us. Bringing soul back to our culture and a sense of sacredness back to all things, is to my mind essential for the required cultural and spiritual transformation Gus Speth calls for. As is exploring our conversation with the more-than-human world and learning to listen in empathic and generative ways to ourselves and each other, so we may find resolution in place of conflict. These ways of listening to our world and each other are not as dissimilar as they might seem, both herald a move away from othering, towards relating.

“We are talking only to ourselves. We are not talking to the rivers, we are not listening to the wind and stars. We have broken the great conversation. By breaking that conversation we have shattered the universe. All the disasters that are happening now are a consequence of that spiritual autism”

Thomas Berry
The Dream of the Earth
(Vaughan-Lee 2013)
APPENDIX

Appendix 1
Source: Nature and the Human Soul (Plotkin 2009)

Diagram 3-3: The Eight Soulcentric or Ecocentric Stages of Human Development

(For a larger-format version of this diagram that you can download and print, please visit www.natureandthehumansoul.com.)
Appendix 2
The Nature-based map of the human psyche: The 4 facets of the self
Source: Wild Mind (Plotkin 2013)

MAP 1:
INTRAPERSONAL
VIEW OF THE SELF
AND SUBPERSONALITIES
(how we relate to ourselves)

MAP 2:
INTERPERSONAL
VIEW OF THE SELF
AND SUBPERSONALITIES
(how others see us)
Appendix 3
THE DAGARA PEOPLE’S INITIATIONS

“Malidoma Somé, an African shaman of the Dagara people, gives us an extreme example of how therapy and soulcraft goals can diverge. When Dagara boys undergo their initiation ordeals, the people of the village realise that a few boys will never return; they will literally not survive. Why would the Dagara be willing to make such an ultimate sacrifice? For the boys who die, this is certainly not a therapeutic experience. Although the Dagara love their children no less than we do, they understand, as the elders of many cultures emphasise, that without vision -- without soul embodied in the lives of their men and women -- the people shall perish. And, to the boys, the small risk of death is preferable to the living death of an uninitiated life. Besides, when we compare Dagara society with our own, we find that an even greater percentage of our teenagers die -- through suicide, substance abuse, auto accidents, gang warfare, and military service -- in their unsuccessful attempts to initiate themselves. For the Dagara, a few boys perish while the rest attain true adulthood. For us, a larger portion of teens perish and very few ever attain true adulthood. Which approach is more barbaric?” Bill Plotkin

THE HOUSE OF BELONGING
David Whyte

I awoke
this morning
in the gold light
turning this way
and that

thinking for
a moment
it was one
day
like any other.

But
the veil had gone
from my
darkened heart
and
I thought

it must have been the quiet
candlelight
that filled my room,

it must have been
the first
easy rhythm
with which I breathed
myself to sleep,

it must have been
the prayer I said
speaking to the otherness
of the night.

And
I thought
this is the good day
you could
meet your love,

this is the black day
someone close
to you could die.

This is the day
you realise
how easily the thread
is broken
between this world
and the next

and I found myself
sitting up
in the quiet pathway
of light,

the tawny
close-grained cedar
burning round
me like fire
and all the angels of this housely
heaven ascending
through the first
roof of light
the sun has made.

This is the bright home
in which I live,
this is where
I ask
my friends
to come,
this is where I want
to love all the things
it has taken me so long
to learn to love.

This is the temple
of my adult aloneness
and I belong
to that aloneness
as I belong to my life.

There is no house
like the house of belonging.
You are not surprised at the force of the storm—
you have seen it growing.
The trees flee. Their flight
sets the boulevards streaming. And you know:
he whom they flee is the one
you move toward. All your senses
sing him, as you stand at the window.

The weeks stood still in summer.
The trees’ blood rose. Now you feel
it wants to sink back
into the source of everything. You thought
you could trust that power
when you plucked the fruit;
now it becomes a riddle again,
and you again a stranger.

Summer was like your house: you knew
where each thing stood.
Now you must go out into your heart
as onto a vast plain. Now
the immense loneliness begins.

The days go numb, the wind
sucks the world from your senses like withered leaves.

Through the empty branches the sky remains.
It is what you have.
Be earth now, and evensong.
Be the ground lying under that sky.
Be modest now, like a thing
ripened until it is real,
so that he who began it all
can feel you when he reaches for you.
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