

Chapter 5: The Alchemy of Inner Transformation

*Life is a process of becoming, a combination of states we have to go through.
Where people fail is that they wish to elect a state and remain in it.
This is a kind of death.*

~Anais Nin

In the initial three chapters of this book, I described the various symptoms—physical, emotional, mental and spiritual—that mark a woman’s midlife transition. I gave many suggestions for stabilizing these symptoms and providing a deeper context for what is really unfolding. The transformation is wholesale; every aspect of your being is being brought up for you to examine and consider whether it will serve you in the life that waits to be born. I suggested creating a container—a time and space where you can step out of your life in some way to go deeply inward to attune to your soul’s voice during this powerfully transformative time.

While the journey of midlife rebirth has its own timing and unfolding, fortunately there are recognizable phases to your transition that can help guide you through the unpredictable twists and turns of the journey. From the wisdom of alchemy—the ancient process of turning “lead” into “gold”—there are clear, identifiable phases of the inner metamorphosis taking place.

In his fascination with alchemy, Dr. Carl Jung traced alchemy’s roots back to ancient Egypt about 300 BC, the time of Egypt’s waning dynasty. In his research, Jung discovered the story of how the Egyptian Goddess Isis was given the secrets of immortality by angels. These secret processes were used in Egyptian burial rites to ensure that the dead would not remain dead but would be quickly reborn into immortality. This is why, Jung understood, they wrapped and embalmed the bodies so they would remain intact for the dead to reclaim.

The angels demanded that Isis reveal these secrets to no one but her son and her closest friend. No records indicate how the secrets were actually revealed, but the history records suggest that the information spread north to Greece where Hermes, the healer, was given the role of overseeing alchemy. It eventually made its way to Europe where chemists and wizards attempted to use the alchemical processes to literally “turn lead into gold.”

Through his research of alchemy, Jung saw a connection to alchemy and the psyche. He realized alchemy was a way to understand what occurs in the psyche—the ego—during the process of individuation—the driving force of the psyche to realize the potential lying dormant in one’s soul. Through his work we now have a method to make conscious the inner alchemy that takes place within our psyche on its journey to individuation.

Specifically, inner alchemy is the process of transforming a leaden consciousness—one that is denser—into a golden consciousness—one that is lighter and more radiant. In midlife rebirth, it means diving into the inner depths of your psyche to reveal and release the self that has been

* *Jung on Alchemy*, Selected and Introduced by Nathan Schwartz-Salant, 1995

outgrown—your ego’s impressions it has taken on to master life—and discover and embody a greater expression of your soul’s potential that’s awaiting its birth.

What makes inner alchemy challenging is its elusiveness. It operates in the mysterious landscape of the soul and utilizes the language of symbols, images, metaphor and emblems. Often the inner alchemical journey is revealed through dreams, however it takes understanding and interpreting the symbolic and archetypal imagery imbedded in the dream to grasp the soul’s messages.

During midlife rebirth there are four distinct but typically overlapping phases. These are reflected in the four alchemical processes: Solutio, Calcinatio, Sublimatio and Coagulatio. Each has a quality associated with one of the four essential elements. Solutio is associated with the water element as it represents the dissolving of the old life. Calcinatio is associated with the fire element as it represents the inspiration and fire of new life. Sublimatio is associated with the air element as it represents the expansion of life that generates the greater vision for the new life that will be manifest. Coagulatio is associated with the earth element as it represents the manifestation of the new greater expression of life.

While these phases are mysterious and defy being tying down, there are indicators to reveal the deeper process that is unfolding. Once you identify where you are in the journey, there are many things you can do to support the process and gain the maximum benefit.

In the following four chapters I outline each of the phases, giving signs, images and symbols so you can recognize where you are in your inner alchemical journey. In each chapter, I include practices to support you through each of the phases so you can consciously navigate and gain the benefits of each phase. This will help you make your inner journey of transformation with conscious awareness, supporting your rebirth into a more golden version of yourself.

On the next page is a checklist so you can identify which phase you are likely navigating. Note that you will likely have checks in more than one phase; this is very common as the alchemical phases typically overlap and occur in their own way. However there should be more check marks in one phase than any other, indicating which phase you are in at present.

Checklist: Identifying where you are in your transition

Read through each of the statements below and check the ones that most resonate with you at this point in your life. It's likely that you will find that you will have more checks in one of the phases. While the phases are not distinct, you likely will resonate more with one of the phases than the others. This can help you identify where you are in your midlife passage and support you in navigating your journey. As your journey unfolds, come back and visit this checklist again. You may find that you now have more checks in another of the phases. This can be instrumental in helping you gain clarity on what's unfolding at the level of your soul.

Dissolving

- ☐ Lack of energy to hold your life together
- ☐ Feeling drawn to spend time alone
- ☐ Limited motivation to start any new project
- ☐ Uninspired with your work and career
- ☐ Feeling adrift in your life
- ☐ Feeling disconnected from your life

Inspiring

- ☐ Bored with your life
- ☐ Noticing a curiosity to explore new endeavors
- ☐ Remembering unfulfilled dreams from your early life
- ☐ Emerging passion for a new project
- ☐ Increasing interest in creative projects
- ☐ Feeling infused with aliveness and energy

Expanding

- ☐ Reflecting on patterns and the progression of your life
- ☐ Feeling free to explore and be who you envision
- ☐ Watching the drama of your life with detached curiosity
- ☐ Seeing the wholeness in your life
- ☐ Getting a vision of what your life could be
- ☐ Recognizing the possibilities for your life

Manifesting

- ☐ Making something new and meaningful happen in your life
- ☐ Moving forward with manifesting a vision
- ☐ Carrying out and living a new aspect of your life
- ☐ Beginning to master a new craft, skill or profession
- ☐ Having the energy and discipline to follow through on achieving your goals
- ☐ Being fully present as you move forward in your life
- ☐ Building a life that brings you joy and fulfillment

In the next four chapters, I outline the phases in detail and provide specific activities, exercises and practices to help you get the most from each of the phases. Use the above checklist to help you determine which of the four phases to explore in more depth. Pick at least one of the suggested activities for this phase and work with it for at least two weeks. See what it has to offer you. If after two weeks you feel complete, then move on to another of the suggested exercises. In this way you are exploring your deeper process from one particular angle and then trying out a different angle.