

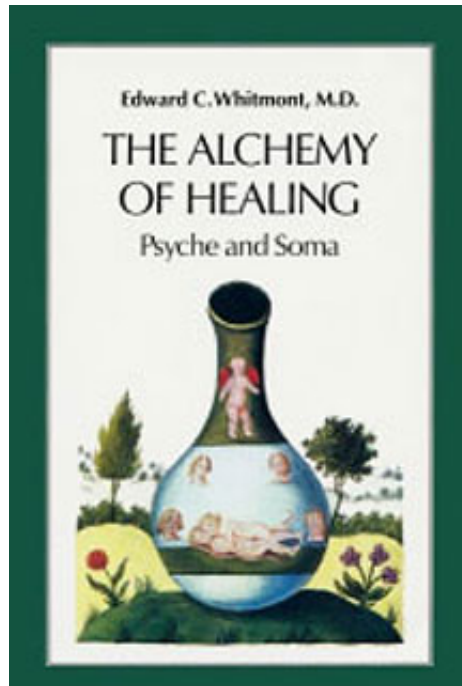
Edward C. Whitmont

The Alchemy of Healing

Reading excerpt

[The Alchemy of Healing](#)
of [Edward C. Whitmont](#)

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INTRODUCTION

The half-known hinders knowing. Since all of our knowing is only half, our knowing always hinders our knowing.

—J.W. von Goethe, *Gedanken zur Naturforschung*,
Zurich: Fretz & Wasmuth, 1949, p. 11

It is probably part of the human condition that cosmologists (or shamans of any age) always think they are knocking on eternity's door, that the final secret of the universe is in reach. It may also be part of the human condition that they are always wrong. Science, inching along by trial-and-error and by doubt, is a graveyard of final answers.

—Dennis Overbye, *Lonely Hearts of the Cosmos: The Scientific Quest for the Secret of the Universe*,
New York: Harper Collins, 1990.

I would like to say something about what physics has to give back to common sense that it seemed to have lost from it . . . because it seems to me that the worst of all possible misunderstandings would be that psychology be influenced to model itself after a physics which is not there anymore, which has been quite outdated.

—Robert Oppenheimer, "Analogy in Science," *The American Psychologist*, Vol. 2. No. 3, March 1956, p. 134.

This book is about that dark borderland where body and soul, substance and spirit, self and other merge and seem to behave as one, yet at the same time manifest visibly and concretely by appearing to split into pairs of conflicting polar opposites. These opposites behave as though striving for resolution, finding (or creating) their own synthesis. They anticipate its "closure" in an overarching and unifying archetypal "essence." From this play of smoke and shadows come our most revered scientific paradigms. The particular paradigm proposed here views illness and healing as a dramatic staging of conflict and conflict resolution by virtue of interplay of polarizing forms which are always prior to the material shapes in which they manifest. This dramatic play serves

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the goal of eventual resolution through a discovery of ever more differentiated forms of consciousness and growth and notably, the differentiation of the personality. In reconciling or bridging polarities, this lineage of healing-creating appears to be of major significance for the evolution of mankind as well as the organism of our planet.

Truth is multifaceted. Thus the view of health, illness and healing offered in these pages should be considered as one among the many possible ways in which uncertainties and paradoxes can be approached. I hope that these ideas may at least direct us toward an understanding of psyche and soma as a functional unit. In presenting a tale of antithesis, paradox and healing-creating, I intend to incorporate insights gathered from the practice of "alternative" medicines, even though they continue to be incomprehensible to contemporary biology and Western medicine. These insights include the psychological and psychosomatic implications to be derived from Jungian depth psychology, and the implications of the viability of substances administered in the ultramolecular, "transmaterial" form and according to the simile principle of the homeopathic method.

My interest in areas proscribed by official medicine goes back to my medical school days of the early 1930s. At that time therapeutic practice and teaching were still at the height of medical nihilism. We spent hours on fine points of diagnosis. But when it came to therapy, to the question of how to aid the conditions so skillfully diagnosed, there was usually only a shrugging of the shoulders. If time and a strong organism would not do the job, there was not much else a physician had to offer besides temporary symptomatic relief. (As far as most chronic conditions are concerned, this has not really changed despite dramatic surface transformations.) I remember one clinical teacher asserting that there were really only two useful drugs: digitalis and castor oil. The rest he regarded as mostly make-believe. Indeed, quite often some treatment was administered merely *"ut aliquid fiat"*, "as the term went, in order to satisfy the patient by "doing something" even though it was known to be ineffective. Now we have at least recognized the induction benefit of the placebo. At that time, the placebo effect was still contemptuously dismissed as "nothing but suggestion," without anybody troubling to ask what sug-

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gestion really is and what its relation to the total organismic function might be.

While present-day medicine has at its disposal a wider spectrum of therapeutically effective drugs and much more advanced surgical techniques, it still operates in terms of isolated functions of an assumed physiochemical human machine, all protestations of holism notwithstanding. The malfunctioning of the machine's parts have to be identified in order to be fixed. Thus inflammatory and allergic states are treated with steroids (cortisone, etc.) even though over the long range the drug's dynamic spectrum, its "side effects" may damage the immune system and upset hormonal balance. When prescribed for alleviation of fever or rheumatic inflammation, aspirin may deter blood coagulation, agitate stomach functions and may cause brain damage in some children. Other drugs have even more powerful side effects: chemotherapy for cancer tends to reduce the patient to a vegetable! While routinely acknowledged and excused, such so-called "side" effects are not peripheral at all; they are direct expressions of interference with organismic integrity, and they result in toxic damage and reduced functioning. Even though a targeted disturbance or discomfort may be temporarily or even permanently relieved, this remediation often occurs at the price of unbalancing and damaging the overall health of the organism.

This is not to deny that such partially damaging approaches may at times be a lesser evil and therefore called for; they are vitally important in acute emergencies and even permanently, when no genuine healing may be possible. But they should not be confused with genuine healing.

I must make another subtle point here. There is no malefic-beneficial dualism: toxic or potentially damaging agencies may also serve genuine healing when applied with due regard to organismic integrity. The needle in the hand of the acupuncturist, the knife in the hand of the surgeon, microdoses of arsenic administered according to the homeopathic simile principle all may heal when used as means of harmonizing, balancing and reintegrating overall psychosomatic functioning. When aimed at isolated functions, however, they serve to forcibly change one part, hence evoking a compensatory unbalance of others. Then such remedies become irremediable.

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It happens that one of my professors, B. Aschner, studied and translated the works of the late-Medieval alchemist-physician Paracelsus. Aschner felt there might be value in many of the modes of treatment dismissed or disregarded by his own fellow scientists with allegiance to then-current methods. He considered spiritual healing, acupuncture, homeopathy, osteopathy, chiropractic and naturopathy as Neo-Paracelsan disciplines. Stimulated by his lectures and writings and frustrated by what I felt to be my repertoire of ignorance of genuine healing techniques, I set out to investigate and gain personal experience in as many of these alternative methods as I could. I did discover that within limited scopes most of them were effective, though their results were inexplicable within the frame of reference I had been taught.

At the same time, I began to pay particular attention to the psychological aspect of illness. My personal experience with an always-ailing mother had brought me to the intuition that illness must be, if not a neurosis proper, then at least an equivalent event of bodily nature. Later I thought it perhaps a way of working out (or failing to work out) emotional issues. In fact, for a time I even began to wonder whether it was not counterproductive for a physician to reduce or alleviate physical symptomology, since this might prevent the patient's coming to terms with the underlying psychological issue. While those early musings were simplistic indeed (and quickly abandoned), the bodily aspects of emotional disorders and the emotional and psychological aspects of physical disorders continued to fascinate me.

In exploring homeopathy I was struck by the fact that the choice of medicine is always approached in terms of bio-emotional wholeness, hence implying an equivalent origin of the illness. Diagnostic indications for potentially beneficial medicines always have to include the patient's temperamental and emotional state. Medicinal substances are studied as if they each represent or embody a specific personality type. While reading Jung's studies of alchemy, I noted the similarity of the homeopathic approach to the alchemical viewpoint. The alchemical process also requires an integration of molecular-based substance and psychodynamically arising complexes. Some first theoretical conclusions from these comparisons I subsequently published in *Psyche and Substance* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1980, 1982, 1991).

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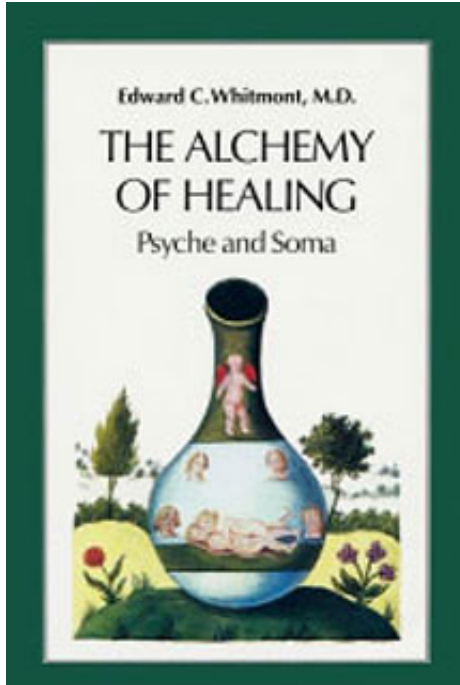
When viewed in terms of practical clinical results, moreover, Jung's psychology and Hahnemann's homeopathy both struck me as uniquely effective modalities where conventional methods did not work. They gave entirely new perspectives to the nature of human organismic functioning, hence also to illness and healing.

Jung's work demonstrates that much if not most of what we ascribe to random or accidental behavior is actually an expression of an unconscious, creative depth-awareness which expresses a goal-directed activity of an evolving transpersonal dynamic that both includes and transcends personal rational functioning. Behind apparent randomness stands the archetypal order of an individual cosmic play, directed by a transcendental center, which Jung termed the "Self" (to be distinguished from the personal ego self spoken of in Freud's psychoanalysis). By virtue of the ego's assimilating as-yet-unconscious dynamics, the Self aims toward differentiation and development of the empirical personality. This lifelong process Jung called individuation. The seemingly "weird" language and imagery of dreams, mythology, fairy tales and fantasy can be read as hieroglyphic expressions or messages of the Self's creative intentionality.

Homeopathy confronts us with the seeming paradox of non-substantial substance, a paradox that modern physics is barely beginning to help us understand. It reveals the whole spectrum of potential for human and animal disease (as well as the parameters for its healing), spread out and mirrored in the various substances that constitute the material body of our planet. The morphology of one not only reflects but functionally expresses the dynamic of the other. It is as though our conflicts and illnesses and their cures are aspects of the "stuff of which our earth itself is made, and that they are perhaps incorporated in such a way as to become conscious of themselves through human self-awareness.

Thus what we call consciousness is the focal point upon which psychic, somatic and outer world events seem to converge in what might turn out to be a shared evolutionary transformation. The planet and our own nature may evolve through dramatic crises and their resolutions.

Jung's work has been extensively described and documented by many authors, myself included (*The Symbolic Quest*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969, 1991). Homeopathy is probably less well known to the reader and will be summarized succinctly.



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