Knowing the Self Through Fantasy: Toward a Mytho-poetic View of Transformative Learning

John M. Dirkx
Michigan State University

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Abstract. Research suggests that adult learning can have a profound effect on our sense of self. Emergence of transformational theory provides a framework for understanding these processes of self-knowing. Yet, this research and theory is dominated by an heroic perspective, in which transformation results from hard effort of a rational ego. Relying on a philosophy of imagination and Jungian psychology, transformative learning is re-visioned here as a journey of soul, in which image and fantasy mediate processes of self-knowing.

Recent theoretical approaches to understanding learning in adulthood have underscored the importance of subjective as well as objective aspects of knowledge. We understand the process of coming to know the text as inherently contextual, subjective, and participatory, one in which we construct meaning of what it is we are coming to know. The idea of adult learning as a process of personal meaning-making has received considerable momentum from the development of transformation theory, particularly as is articulated by Daloz (1986), Mezirow (1991, 1995), Cranton (1994), and others. These scholars propose a view of adult learning as an ongoing, continuous process of re-constructing the meaning of our experience and reflecting a capacity for individual growth, change, and transformation. Within this framework, however, the role of adult learning within processes of self-formation and re-formation is understood largely from a cognitive-developmental perspective. Taken as narrative, this story reveals a sense of transformative learning as an heroic journey undertaken by a rational ego in pursuit of consciousness and enlightenment. In advancing a more participatory understanding of knowledge, however, this view of transformative learning, understates non-egoic processes of learning and the role of imagination in self-transformation. As a result, it fails to adequately account for the emotional and spiritual dimensions that seem to be a critical aspect of transformative learning experiences (Taylor, 1997).

In this "age of information," we need to re-vision how "text" - the skills, content, or subject matter in adult learning - obtains personal or collective meaning and significance. What seems to be needed for this transformation of information into deeply meaningful knowledge to occur? How might the learning of this text be envisioned in a way that we also foster transformation of our selves and the world in which we live? These are the questions with which I have been alternately struggling and dancing in my own learning, teaching, and research. To address these questions fully, more than a shift from the dominant paradigm of technical-rationality to

contextual learning or constructive knowing is needed (Sloan, 1983). Attention to imagination, feeling, and fantasy are also critical dimensions of this sense-making process. Building on constructivist and imaginative traditions already present in adult learning, my purpose here is to contribute to the emergence of an alternative view of transformative learning, one in which transformation is seen as a process of self-knowing evoked and guided by, embedded in, and derived from image and fantasy rather than analytical conceptions alone. I suggest that, when viewed from this point of perspective, transformative learning is better understood as an on-going, mythic journey of the soul.

The Role of Imagination in Adult Learning

In general, imagination has not received extensive attention from scholars of adult learning or its role in transformation. Only a few have incorporated the notion within their thinking. In discussing the process of meaning-making, Mezirow (1995, p. 39) states that "We interpret the meaning of each new sensory experience by imaginatively projecting images and value-laden symbolic modes upon our sensory experience and, by metaphorical inference, construe meaning." Imagination is, in Mezirow's (1991, p. 83) words, indispensable to understanding the unknown. Mezirow sees imagination as a process of alternative ways of seeing and interpreting our world. Brookfield (1987) refers to the word "imagine" as one of the most powerful in our language (p. 111). Clark (1997, p. 17)) speaks of the imagination as "the place where our experiences (inner and outer, conscious and unconscious) are filtered. The imagination is where our actions are shaped based on the assumptions we hold."

With the possible exception of Clark, however, these views suggest that imagination is in the service of more conscious, rational, and ego-based forms of learning. The idea that imagination leads to conceptual ways of understanding and meaning-making, however, reflects only one orientation within a broader philosophy of imagination, dating back in a formal sense at least to the work of the 18th century Italian scholar, Giambattista Vico (Verene, 1981), and reflected in more contemporary scholars such as Cassirer, Langer, Johnson, Warnock, and Bohm. While this philosophy challenges exclusive reliance on rational and conceptual modes of knowing and learning (Verene, 1981, p. 30), the idea that imagination is a kind of precursor to conceptual or reflective thought represents what I call the *rationalist orientation* within this broader tradition. Proponents of this view see knowing through imagination eventually being represented in language, belief systems, reason, and rationality, through which we then come to know ourselves and the world (e.g. Bohm, 1980; Mezirow, 1995). Imagination and emotion are understood as perceptual aids which help us see the world in more creative and rich ways, a kind of prereflective, "presentational construal" (Mezirow, 1991) that creates alternatives and possibilities on which we can reflect and analyze. Ultimately, Mezirow and others within this orientation understand meaning-making, in a transformative sense, as a conceptual and rational process. They stress primacy of ego consciousness and rely on conceptual representations of reality.

The core of the problem, then, in understanding transformative learning as meaning-making and self-knowing is an unquestioned belief that meaning and self-knowledge are derived from a rational consideration of the text in light of one's experiences, that meaning and knowledge are ultimately derived from rationality. While helpful in some respects, this view of transformative learning virtually ignores the role that imagination and fantasy play in coming to know our selves within particular contexts of learning. Along with Boyd (1991; Boyd & Myers, 1988), and others, I hold as a principle aim of adult education to foster knowledge of one's self, or self-knowing. By this I mean enhancing our capacity to connect and dialog with those aspects of the self not readily available to the waking, conscious self and, through this process of dialog, to elaborate and deepen our understanding of the many different aspects of one's psyche that make up the self or, as Hillman (1975) might say, the many selves that make up the human psyche. At the core of this view of transformative learning is the idea that the text, broadly understood, represents a significant potential for self-transformation. In this view, the self transacts with the text in a way that fosters not only construction of knowledge but re-construction or re-formation of the self.

In the remainder of this paper, I sketch an alternative conception of transformative learning as self-knowing. This perspective relies on archetypal psychology and a philosophy of imagination, in which meaning and truth are revealed through imagination and fantasy - a poetics of mind - and not merely rational ways of knowing. Building on prior work (Boyd, 1991; Boyd & Myers, 1988; Clark, 1997; Dirkx, 1997; Dirkx & Deems, 1996; Nelson, 1997; Scott, 1997), I argue for a view of transformative learning mediated by images and reflecting a journey of soul.

A Mytho-Poetic Perspective of Transformative Learning

Much of adult learning provides a context for fostering a kind of self-knowing that enriches both the individual and her or his social world. The perspective I am trying to develop seeks a deeper understanding of the emotional and spiritual dimensions that are often associated with these profoundly meaningful experiences. By approaching these experiences imaginatively rather than merely conceptually, learners locate and construct, through enduring mythological motifs, themes, and images, deep meaning, value, and quality in the relationship between the text and their own life experiences.

A philosophy of imagination challenges exclusive reliance on rational and conceptual modes of knowing and learning and the technicism and literalism they foster. A philosophy of imagination "places the image over the concept, the speech over the argument, and the mythic divination over the fact" (Verene, 1981, p. 30). When speaking about imagination, image, the imaginal, and fantasy, we use these terms not in the sense of imaginary, fictive, or otherwise unreal, but as "the central importance of imagination and insight in all our thinking and knowing....our means of interpreting the world...also our means of forming images in the mind" (p. 140). Images are *the way* in which we perceive, see, and come to know ourselves and the world. They play a critical role in making sense of our experiences

by allowing us to find value and meaning in them (Hillman, 1989, pp. 21-22). Fundamentally, understanding flows from images and not rational categories. As Moore (1992) suggests, "We have a longing for community and relatedness and for a cosmic vision, but we go after them with literal hardware instead of sensitivity of the heart" (p. 208). "Thinking" our way through this mind-body split is, according to Moore, part of the problem and not a resolution. He suggests another possibility, one in which imagination connects us, through its images, in a deep and profound way with the depth of our being. This is the path of soul or mytho-poetic consciousness.

The "text" in adult learning represents a potential for connection with and nurturing of soul, of deep imaginative approaches to understanding ourselves and our relationship with the world. The *psyche* or soul is central to understanding who we are as persons and as a society. Soul manifests itself in consciousness as a search for meaning in life. Moore (1992) suggests that "Tradition teaches us that the soul lies midway between understanding and unconsciousness, and that its instrument is neither the mind nor the body, but imagination" (p. xi). It is not a thing but a quality of experience - of life and of ourselves. Soul has to do with heart, depth, relatedness, depth, and personal substance. Hillman (1975) suggests that "the word refers to that unknown component which makes meaning possible, turns events into experiences....soul refers to the *deepening* of experiences....the imaginative possibility in our natures, the experiencing through reflective speculation, dream, image, and fantasy -that mode which recognizes all realities as primarily symbolic or metaphorical (p. x).

The mytho-poetic perspective places primary importance on recognizing and understanding the images which populate and animate consciousness. These images represent gateways to the unconscious. The self is understood and experienced as inner entities which seem to have a life of their own, such as "intentions, behaviors, voices, feelings, that I do not control with my will or cannot connect with my reason" Hillman, 1975, p. 2). There is an aspect of my self that is ambitious, wants to achieve, be famous and respected by my peers. This is the keynote speaker, the well -known author who monitors his book sales almost daily. There is another aspect of myself which is troubled with this person, finds him ego-centric, self-centered, and not terribly sensitive. This is the monk, the one who wants to go about his work quietly and thoughtfully, living simply and close to the earth. These are examples of the "selves" that call my psyche home.

The Image as Soul's Messenger

These age-less, universal voices take form and substance through images, which manifest deep and profound feelings and emotions about who we are and how we feel about our life experiences. In seeking to understanding emotions within his own life, Jung described the close relationship between image and emotion: "I learned how helpful it can be...to find the particular images which lies behind emotions" (Chodorow, 1997, p. 26). In rev-visioning a way of knowing through imagination, Hillman (1975) stresses the need to grasp the archetypal significance that is carried in the depth of our words. Images are ways through

which individuals and collectives potentially come to express and connect with this deeper reality. Images are "angels" or message-bearers of the soul and, consequently, represent the depth of our experiences. Soul is not merely manifest in one's inner images but also in shared ideas within the world as well (Hillman, 1975; Sardello, 1992). They are reflected in big words or concepts, such as Truth, Power, Justice, and Love. These are ideas that animate not just individuals but groups of people and even whole populations. When we speak of soul within an organization, it is likely that we are participating in or at least observing the manifestation of one or more of these big ideas. The power of these ideas rests not with their intellectual heritage alone but with their capacity to activate the imagination, to invite persons to engage in imaginative ways with themselves and their context. They connect us both with deep aspects of our inner life and with enduring qualities of life as a member of a community.

Charged images often represent complexes, in which we encounter psychic energy that is clustered around certain concerns or issues that usually reflect various aspects of our relationships with others. Common examples include the authority, inferiority, mother, father, and ego complexes. When these complexes manifest themselves in the form of images, they carry with them an imperative quality - we are compelled, drawn into, and taken over by them. It is as if, for that moment, consciousness emanates from another place within us, other than one's ego. Bursts of insight, intuition, and the "eureka" experience, as well as strong moments of anger and sadness illustrate how these images serve as conduits or messengers for deeper entities within the human and collective psyche. Working with images draws us down into ourselves but, paradoxically, also out into the world. This idea of soul as bridging inner experiences with aspects of our outer worlds is a key idea to understanding how this imaginal world is manifest within transformation.

Working with the Image in Adult Learning

So what does all of this then have to do with fostering self-knowledge within adult learning? How do multiple selves, big ideas, and soul relate to education-for-work programs, informal learning, or other adult education activities? The notion of soul is predicated on the assumption that, in and through a study of text, we connect with and express in a fundamental way who we are as persons and as a society. When approached through soul, adult learning puts us in touch with the archetypal nature of our being. By becoming aware of the inner forces which populate our psyche, by participating with them in a more conscious manner, we are less likely to be unwillingly buffeted around by their presence in our lives. When we enter in a conscious dialogue with them, we create the opportunity for deeper meaning and more satisfying relationships with our world. The basis for this active engagement and dialogue is imagination. In working with the imagination, it is important to differentiate images as constructions of our conscious, cognitive egos, and images which arrive as angels or message-bearers from the psyche. It is the latter which is the focus of learning through soul. From the mytho-poetic perspective, images and fantasies which flow from the work of the imagination are not under the willful control of the ego. They are not cognitive constructions which we work to create. Rather,

they arrive as they so choose, as acts of grace, relatively independent of the needs and desires of the ego. Like Marley's ghosts in *A Christmas Carol*, these images beckon us to vistas and realms of meaning not open to ordinary, waking, ego-based consciousness. It was no accident that these ghosts appeared to Scrooge in the middle of the night, during sleep.

The imaginal method is critical in recognizing, naming, and understanding the meaning of images concealed within our deep, often emotional experiences of the text (Hillman, 1975), but we do not create the images or their meanings through these methods. Our soul work - our learning - is to recognize, elaborate, and differentiate them as a means of developing a deeper understanding of our experience in the context of adult learning. Strong emotions and deep feelings arising within some aspect of adult learning suggest engagement with soul. These emotions and images may arise in association with the "text" or the content or skill being learned, or within relationships with others within one's workplace or learning setting. The purpose of the imaginal method or soulwork is not to analyze and dissect these emotions and feelings but to imaginatively elaborate their meaning in one's life. In contrast to Mezirow's (1991) notion of transformative learning, in which we are encouraged to ask "how" or "why" questions about these feelings and emotions, we might simply ask "what:" What do these emotions feel like, remind me of? What other times I have felt this way, experienced these emotions? What was going on then? Who was all involved in that incident? As we elaborate these feelings and emotions, they may begin to take on the form of images. As we recognize, name, and work with the images which animate these aspects of our life, we move toward a deeper, more conscious connection with these aspects of our selves. We befriend that person or persons within our psyche. Here we are talking about the transformation of ordinary existence into the "stuff of soul" (Moore, 1992, p. 205), where there is a meaningful connection through imagination between the text and our life experiences. These images provide access to the psyche, an invitation to the journey of the soul, of coming to know myself as a person. As they take shape within my consciousness, they can deepen my understanding of their meaning, to glimpse the soul through image (Moore, 1989).

Conclusion

In the mytho-poetic view of transformative learning, the aim is not necessarily to develop or to grow towards wholeness, in a humanistic sense. These are objectives of a more spirited, heroic consciousness. Rather, the aim of transformative learning, as I am developing it here, is to deepen our self-understanding by recognizing and elaborating the different and sometimes contradictory essences that have set up housekeeping within our psyches and to learn to live with the tension that is created by recognizing and accepting their presence in our lives. This sort of learning encourages us to embrace the contradictory and paradoxical nature of our lives. Understanding imagination as the source of all psychic life, including reason and rationality, has profound implications for how we think about, design, and implement all forms of adult learning. A few scholars are beginning to suggest how imagination and the mytho-poetic perspective can be reflected in our teaching and learning. Common to these various approaches is a reliance on "seeing"

through the "eyes" of the imagination, of the heart, as opposed to the mind or the head, the merely rational. They suggests that such learning should also be a journey of the soul and imagination as a way in which the truth of the journey reveals itself in our lives.

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