

“My Name Is Elizabeth, and I Have a Gift”
(a sermon delivered at Unity Church–Unitarian, St. Paul, MN)

A friend introduces herself in 12-step gatherings, “My name is Elizabeth, and I have a gift—it is called alcoholism.”

When I first heard her say that, I thought to myself, “What is this all about?” Since then I have heard her say that many times—“I have a gift, and it is called alcoholism”—and I have noted that people have different reactions to what she says. Some people are pleased, but others are actually hostile. By their reactions, they seem to be saying, “If you have a gift, it can’t possibly be alcoholism—alcoholism is an *affliction*, not a gift!”

And my friend Elizabeth probably once saw it herself exactly that way. But not today. She has a gift: “My name is Elizabeth, and I have a gift—it is called alcoholism.”

How did that happen? How did an affliction come to be a gift?

Some might say this is a good example of the therapeutic technique called “reframing,” that is, to reframe a negative statement into a positive statement. Reframing certainly has its place in our lives, but I think that calling this statement—“My name is Elizabeth, and I have a gift”—an example of reframing surely misses the truth.

No, this is about something deeper. It is about transformation, and it is transformation that I want to address this morning.

I have recently begun the study of alchemy as a metaphor in Jungian psychology of the therapeutic process, or for any depth process of introspection. When I began the course, I knew very little about alchemy, except that the alchemists worked during the Middle Ages to find a way to convert lead into gold, and that Carl Jung was so interested in the writings of alchemy that he concentrated on them for the last 30 years of his life.

From my teacher, I have learned that the alchemists laid the groundwork for modern chemistry, for metallurgy, for much of modern physics, even for cooking. And it *is* true that the alchemists *did* indeed seek a way to convert lead into gold. But I have also learned from my teacher that—while *some* alchemists may actually have pursued their craft as the path to earthly riches—alchemy as a whole recognized all along that they were engaged in a quest for something much more valuable than mere gold, for they sought “philosopher’s gold,” the gold that is immutable, incorruptible, pure.

Lead to gold...affliction to gift...transformation.

Alchemists were a solitary lot. They often went from place to place, practicing their mysterious art for awhile, perhaps under the tutelage of an *adept* (or master) until they could attain such a level themselves. And then they would move on to somewhere else to further their own studies and mentor an adept-in-training, as they had been mentored.

Alchemists believed that their attitude made a difference to The Work—they were not merely doing experiments, playing no part in the outcome once they began the experiment. No, the manner in which they approached The Work made a difference, and so alchemy at its deepest was a very spiritual discipline. I believe, like Jung, that the alchemists have a lot to teach us, and I think this attitude of reverence and purity of purpose for The Work would be a pretty good thing for all of us.

What was it that the alchemists actually did? First of all, alchemists worked with *prima materia*, “the original material.” If you are following the metaphor of alchemy and psychotherapy, you probably have guessed that this *prima materia* is what you—or, if you want a

little distance here, what your *client*—brings to therapy...that is, the material of your life and your experience.

Alchemists believed that transformation of the *prima materia* from its original state into its ultimate potential— something much finer and more refined, more complete and perfect—required a long process of change from one state to another, then back again...from a state of *coagulo* (“solid”) to *solutio* (“liquid” or “airy”), from being grounded (*coagulo*) to flowing (*solutio*) and back again, on and on through identifiable stages of transformation. The work went on inside a *vas*, a vessel or closed container that would not itself be changed by the heat of the fire which the alchemists applied. The *vas* was completely impenetrable, except for one force—but we’ll get to that in a bit. For now, just imagine the *vas* as a completely closed container into which the *prima materia* (or “original material”) was placed.

Alchemists recognized—just as does any competent chef—that there are many different types of fire and many different types of heating—dry heat, moist heat, sudden heat, long slow heat, and so on—and different methods of cooling...and that all these different methods produce different results. Just as a chef might plunge steaming green beans into ice water to stop the cooking and retain the brilliant color, or place a pie in the open window to cool slowly—but would never place a light and airy soufflé in a draft—so too would an *adept* know which type of fire was needed to affect what sort of change in the *prima materia* inside the *vas*.

In their work with different materials, alchemists noted certain physical changes—for example, the fire often produced a blackening to the *prima materia* or (depending upon the substance and the type of heat and other variables) a yellowing, a reddening, or even a whitening—these are the distinct stages of alchemical transformation.

The “blackening” was called the *nigrado*, and I’m willing to bet that almost all of us know a time when we felt lost and in darkness, perhaps as if we were falling into the abyss. “I have an affliction...I have a wound.” Each of us must experience our specific afflictions, our specific wounds, in the *nigrado*. Whatever your wound, your affliction, alchemy teaches us this curious thing: You must first pass through this blackening stage of *nigrado* if you are to have any hope of attaining the true gold at the end.

In his wonderful book *Transitions*, William Bridges notes that transition from one way of being to another way of being cannot begin until something has ended—that is, the old way of being has died—and we have spent some time in what he calls “the neutral zone” and what others will recognize as “the wilderness.”

In male initiation rites, for example, the transition is from boyhood to manhood, so the boy must ritually die. That’s the ending. Then the man-to-be, the boy-no-longer, enters “the neutral zone”...or “the wilderness”... or *nigrado*...where he wanders in search of—he knows not what, for there seems to be no direction in the wilderness; he recognizes nothing that he has known up until this point in his life.

Alchemical work is long and hard and often tedious, and it often seems as though things go on unchanging, day after day. But some time during *nigrado* comes *ablutio*, or “blueing,” that stage where...something seems different. Maybe it comes after we have spent enough time in the *nigrado*, or when we have finally learned enough, or maybe when we have changed enough, or even reframed enough.

But *ablutio* is definitely that stage in transformation that imagination begins. One day, things seem somehow different. In the initiation process, the boy-who-will-be-a-man feels the same, the world looks the same—yet somehow something is different. Anyone who has ever

moved through depression or survived the breakup of a marriage or grieved the loss of someone dear will recognize *ablutio*: Nothing has changed, things are the same—yet somehow, it looks different. There is *hope*.

And then comes *albedo*, a “whitening.” The psychologist James Hillman cautions us to be careful that we do not confuse the white of *albedo* with the white of innocence and childhood, for *this* whitening is a cleansed state that comes to one who has moved through *nigrado*. This is a re-whitening, if you will, the attainment of a certain brightness and clarity in life that comes only with experience.

The color of *albedo* is most often described as silver, as in the “silvery moon.” And once again Hillman cautions us: Silver, though bright and shiny, is a metal that can tarnish and turn dark once again—that is, we move through the dark spaces in our lives into a brighter time, when we can look back and see with some clarity what has happened to us. We have some perspective. Yet, this is not somewhere that we can stay indefinitely—for we, like silver, can still tarnish and turn dark again.

And so the work continues. More time in the *vas*, more heat, more change. (And remember, we can go back and repeat any of the previous stages almost any number of times.) Eventually, if we are painstaking about The Work, we move through *albedo* to *rubido*, or “reddening,” and then to the final point, the philosopher’s gold. Are you still with me on this metaphor? The *prima materia*...what we bring to The Work. The *vas*—the safe container of the therapeutic relationship or wherever else we do our work. The fire that unleashes the psychological processes of *nigrado*, *ablutio*, *albedo*, and so on.

And then—alchemical gold, the philosopher’s gold or philosopher’s stone, the elixir, the quintessence.

“My name is Elizabeth, and I have a gift—it’s called alcoholism.”

A *gift*, not an affliction—imagine! From *lead*, or alcoholism, to *gold*—a gift indeed! That is surely the sort of gold that any alchemist worth his salt would recognize! This is transformation!

But...how did it happen—*really*? How do you actually go about turning lead into gold...even metaphorically?

The alchemists believed that the attitude they brought to the work made a difference, and I think so too. But if that’s all, then we would have to ascribe god-like powers to alchemists... and to psychotherapists and maybe to preachers: If you just have enough of the right attitude, if you just believe hard enough, and if you do the work just right, then you get gold.

But that didn’t quite do it for the alchemists. So what is it that makes the different?

A few minutes ago I said that the alchemists did their work on the *prima materia* inside the *vas*, the closed vessel completely impenetrable—except to one force. That was Hermes, the messenger of the gods. The *vas* was “hermetically sealed” to keep out everything but Hermes. And even if we wanted to, we just couldn’t keep Hermes out. We use that term “hermetically sealed” today to mean exactly the same as the alchemists meant it centuries ago (except that we have dropped the notion of Hermes himself)—that is, airtight, sealed off from outside influence, with Hermes alone able to pass through the seal to enter the *vas*.

Who is this Hermes? He is the Greek god of language, whom the Romans called Mercury—the god of language who often works quietly, subtly, carrying secret messages. Hermes reveals hidden connections, even though he himself prefers to remain hidden. Hermes is sometimes seen as a trickster figure, like Coyote, who can speak the real truth even when it

sounds at first as though he is saying just what we want to hear. Hermes' realm is in dreams and in Hades—he conducts the dead into the underworld.

I have defined “hermetically sealed” as shut off from outside influence—so if Hermes is not an *outside* influence (since he is able to move through the seal of the closed container), how shall we interpret Hermes in our time?

Well, this is where you have to continue your own work, though I can give you a couple of *my* ideas: Hermes, the unseen force that crosses boundaries no one else can cross...from life to death and back again...from outside the sealed *vas* to the *prima materia* inside...from the unconscious realm of dreams and images into the conscious world of sunlight and flowers and Sunday mornings and people greeting one another.

Is this the unconscious at work? The Self? Psyche? God? The Great Spirit? Mystery? I confess that I see Hermes as all these. But does it matter which one we call it? Or is it the work itself that is important...the work and our own quest for the elixir, the Holy Grail, the quintessence, the philosopher's gold?

“We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word *serenity* and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others.

“That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us.

“We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

“Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us—sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. They will always materialize if we work for them.” Affliction to gift...lead to gold...a gold more precious than any material treasure—psychological and spiritual transformation.

“Are these extravagant promises? We think not. They are being fulfilled among us...They will always materialize if we work for them.”

“My name is Elizabeth—and I have a gift.”