

Joe the Alchemist

By Dyane N. Sherwood

Joe was my main control analyst, and during the last five years we have collaborated on a book together, something neither of us planned but that just seemed to happen. My patients were bringing in material that seemed to have an uncanny connection to the images in a series of illuminated alchemical paintings (the *Splendor Solis*) that Joe had viewed in the British Library and had used in his teaching in our Institute. During consultation, I found Joe's comments so pertinent and articulate that I wished I could have a better record of his exact words. At the same time, he was so adept at drawing me out that it was difficult to get him to speak more completely about his understanding of alchemy and the psyche. Then I had an inspiration: I knew he wouldn't put his name to something unless it truly reflected his ideas, not mine, so I suggested that the transcription of a lecture he had given in 1987 could be expanded into a small book. He liked the idea very much, and I went to work to get the lecture into my computer to facilitate the editing. As it turned out, I was not successful in getting Joe's ideas in pure form into the book. Over time, the project took on a life of its own, as the images worked on us both, and I began to offer more of my ideas and research on the images. Joe would carefully look over everything and would be quite definite on the few occasions when he thought I was off-track. His directness allowed me the freedom to express my own ideas, take more risks, and develop an increasing self-confidence in the worth of my contributions. Our relationship had its own alchemy, growing in the give-and-take of the joint project. Joe even responded with interest and openness when I noticed that a published dream of his

was relevant to one of the *Splendor Solis* images. Throughout our work on the book, I felt remarkably unencumbered by any expectations from Joe. At one point, I had to set aside the project for a year due to physical illness, and he never pressured me in any way nor did he express concern about what would happen to the book.

Joe Henderson is a quietly elegant man, well-mannered, who usually wears a jacket and a tie (unusual in the casual California culture). His elegance and economy of expression can be seen in his writing. Yet his way of saying things can create a sense of recognition from within the reader, and the words themselves become vessels for imagination and associations, inviting deeper reflection.

Joe lives simply in an unassuming but unique house on a hilltop in Ross, California. From the spacious interior garden, there are views of Mt. Tamalpais, as well as wooded hilltops and sky in all directions. In his living room, things seem to have their place rather than being on display. These things include an alabaster Jain Tirthankara, seated in the lotus posture, which was a gift from Rabindranath Tagore to his father-in-law, the Cambridge scholar F. M. Cornford; an old *tangka* of Manjusri (the Tibetan bodhisattva of discriminating wisdom); two small Jackson Pollack pastels; and many small stones that seem to be quietly sacred. A side table always contains his current reading: journals and books on art, intellectual history, world affairs, and novels.

Joe still practices as an analyst, although he gave up his office in San Francisco a few years ago. He now sees patients in his small octagonal office situated at the back of his garden, accessible by a stone path, which runs along behind his house and then across a lawn. In his office, in addition to shelves with many books, are two striking paintings of Native American dancers, colorful in their ceremonial costumes against white backgrounds, and a symbolic drawing he made himself during his analysis with Jung in the 1930s.

Recently, Joe told me how he came to make the symbolic drawing. He had been in London attending University College to take science classes in order to qualify for medical school. He had a difficult time because he was not very interested in the subject matter offered in those most rigorous courses. Having failed his examination in physics, he left London in a

state of great internal pressure and uncertainty to spend his holiday in Zurich in hopes of having some sessions with Jung. Just as he arrived, Jung and the other analysts left on their holidays. He had to be on his own, so he spent most of the next three weeks in his room making a drawing that emerged from two powerful dreams. In the first dream, a beautiful white horse was running on a dark sea. An artery at the back of its neck was fully exposed, and an eagle came down from the sky and pierced the horse in the neck, killing it. In a subsequent dream, there was a black fish on the bottom of the sea. A snake with a red head came from below and bit the fish—this bite was not life-taking but rather life-giving. In Joe's drawing the horse and eagle appear at the top and the black fish and snake are at the bottom. In between is an intricate quaternary form, with openings in the four directions occupied by Mayan deities, represented as in Mayan codices. While the care with which the drawing was made and the fourfold design evoke a feeling of serenity, the details of the design are full of movement and dynamic tension, pulsating with life.

Tom Kirsch (personal communication) has noted that, unlike many of Jung's non-Swiss analysts, who had their work with Jung interrupted by the Second World War, Joe's analysis with Jung had come to its natural conclusion. Joe told me something about this in November, 2000, during a conversation about shamanic aspects of Greek myth and ritual. He recalled a dream of his own with a shamanic theme, which signaled the end of his analytic work with Jung:

Dr. Baynes (whom I'd first seen for analysis and from him learned about Jung) said, "Joe, this terrible thing has happened. You're going to be so upset. Jung has died." Then I heard tin cans and anything that could be beaten by Chinese peasants to allow Jung to go up to heaven. It was a joyous thing.

Joe continued,

I immediately knew it was the death of my dependence on him [Jung].

Dr. Baynes's concern was personal feeling: he was speaking from his transference to Jung. The Chinese peasants were the shamans.

It came from a natural instinct for what should be done,

the creation of energy needed to get soul out of body and onto higher things.

I asked if he had told this dream to Jung, and he responded,

I didn't need to, because it didn't say anything that I didn't understand. I also had other dreams of separating from Jung. One was more alchemical: I was sitting talking to him. There was a large object between us, like a rough stone. I said, "Tell me what something means." He pointed and said impatiently, "Look at the stone." I realized that the stone was a diamond, and I had to bring it out of its roughness into a solid form. That was, for me, the philosopher's stone.

Later in our conversation, Joe commented that, "*Totem and Taboo* was the nearest Freud ever got to understanding the deep unconscious."

In his outward demeanor, I think of Joe as more English than American, but he has his roots in the American West in the state of Nevada, which in his boyhood was an unpopulated expanse of desert and prairie with vast, open skies. He and Helena made the choice to leave England to live in the United States, moving first to New York and then to San Francisco, where Joe had lived as a young college graduate, writing book reviews and drama criticism for two small cultural magazines, one of which was named *The Argonaut*. Joe's many articles on Native Americans, as well as some of his own published dreams, convey his deep connection to the land of this hemisphere and its original inhabitants.

Sometimes people find in Joe's reserve a feeling of being unrelated; however, I find him to be very related but not in the usual American outgoing way. Joe is related in a subtle, refined, and quiet way that feels as if it comes from an older, more developed culture. Joe was a French literature major at Princeton, and he told me that shortly after his marriage to his English wife, Helena, he bought her a French cookbook "for English houses." So this may provide some hint as to his relationship to his inner life and his more feminine side.

While Joe loves the life of the mind and symbols, he also takes pleasure in a flower blooming in his garden, a delicious meal, a glass of wine. We have laughed a lot. And he has not stopped living in anticipation of his own death. Last year he bought a new winter coat and began with a new patient. Last

week he mentioned to me that he was thinking of getting a new car—although he had to stop driving himself five or six years ago, which he did not like at all! With his characteristic openness to whatever the next experience brings, Joe found a driver, Kenny Miles, whose beautiful, deep voice is easy for Joe to hear and who seems to know better than anyone just how to be helpful to Joe without doing too much. They have a very special relationship, and Joe even accepted Kenny's invitation to hear him sing and play in a jazz club.

When I first consulted with Joe, he was always accompanied by his ancient pug, Charlie, who was blind and quite dependent upon Joe. I recall that once, when our candidates' group was meeting with Joe at his home, he left the living room to go to the kitchen. Charlie began to whimper and cry, but immediately calmed as soon as Joe returned. Somehow, for me, it was easier to feel Joe's completeness when Charlie was alive: Charlie was an external representative of Joe's connection to the animal world and nature, something not easily discerned in such a self-contained person as Joe.

One anecdote can perhaps capture Charlie's contribution. During a period when there was quite a bit of discord between the candidates and the training committees, a candidates' group was meeting with Joe at his house and began to tell him about their anxieties and the statements by a committee member that it was the committee's job to "initiate" them. Charlie got up from his customary place next to Joe, walked to the center of the room, and urinated on the floor. So, sometimes Charlie made interpretations that Joe might not express in so direct a way! Joe later told me about this episode, both of us doubling over with laughter, and I have also heard it from the candidates, who felt tremendous relief that the inflation of the committee member had been put in proper perspective. I miss Charlie, whose musky odor permeated Joe's San Francisco office, remaining even after Charlie's death.

Two summers ago, when Joe and I were having lunch at a restaurant near his home, I discovered that we were both reading Phillip Pullman's book, *The Golden Compass*, in which people have an animal companion that is part of them, their *daimon*. I asked him what he thought his *daimon* would be, and he immediately said, "A pug of course!" He said he and Helena had always had a pug. (In his living room, there is a

lovely photograph of Helena holding up a pug puppy.) But Charlie was the best and the last: this is the one matter where Joe seems to have taken his advanced years into account.

I am deeply grateful that Joe has had such a long life, that he continues to be so fully alive and present, so much himself. He is a man who *knows how to be himself*, who *is*, who knows who he is and what he values, and who accepts life with such equanimity that I sometimes find it unsettling. He is not a charismatic man who converts and influences, but in his quiet, deeply introverted way he gives people the gift of themselves. This is why the many people who have analyzed or consulted with him do not become his disciples: they become more dynamically who they are. How does Joe do this? While this question is unanswerable, I can say that, during consultation with him, I felt a spaciousness in his presence. At the same time I felt that I could risk disorientation because I was with someone who would help me find my way while not interfering with my own efforts. Perhaps one could say that one feels the presence of the Self in him, but his utter lack of inflation or pretense does not pull for one's own Self to be projected.

At the risk of digression, I would like to offer an image for this rare quality that seems to live naturally and effortlessly in Joe. An eighteenth century alchemical drawing (Fig. 1) shows a king with red skin seated on a throne. (The color red represents the final stage in the alchemical process, which has proceeded from the *prima materia* through a purification into the fullness of life.) The king's posture and extended arms suggest an open attitude, and on his chest a large red heart emanates rays of red light. A mandorla around the king suggests his identification with the sun. Kneeling and standing in a semi-circle are six naked human figures representing the six heavenly bodies or "planets" visible to the naked eye (the five planets nearest the sun plus the moon). Each figure holds his or her crown in upraised hands, and the rays emanating from the king's heart shine through each crown onto the human figures, as if they are attracting the rays toward themselves by holding up their crowns. To my mind the king in this drawing is not Joe, but the strong presence of the Self as the guiding force in him, which is felt deeply by very different people (symbolized in astrology by the distinct character traits associated with each planet). At the top of the image is the word

projectio. This is a different kind of projection from the way we use the word in modern depth psychology, and I believe it represents a person whose own relationship to the Self activates and nourishes the Self in others rather than pulling for the projection of the Self to go in the other direction. To me this is the deepest psychological meaning of the *multiplicatio* of the stone in alchemy.

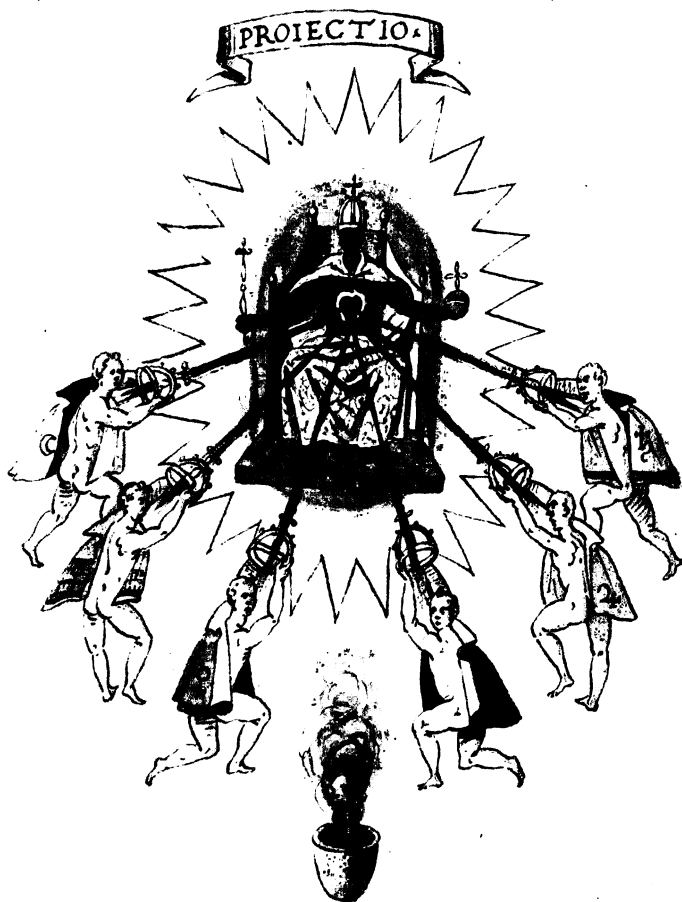


Figure 1. The Projection of the Tincture from the Heart of the King. (Ferguson MS 208, folio 73r, by permission of the Special Collections, Glasgow University Library)

During my early years of consulting with Joe, I felt constantly aware of his advanced age. Each time I walked down the steps outside his San Francisco office, I wondered if I would ever see him again. At one point, I asked about his attitude toward death. Joe told me that he had been able to really live his life, so that death did not frighten him. If there were something beyond this life, it would be the next adventure. Now and then he would wonder, "Is it time now?" It was like walking into the waves at the seashore and asking if he were going to go into the deep. But something would say, "No, not yet."