

Crucible of Love

The Alchemy of Passionate Relationships - Jay Ramsay



Love is a thyng as any spirit free.
Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee,
And nat to been constreynd as a thral;
And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal.

Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Franklin's Tale', The Canterbury Tales

For the guides
'As above, so below'
and the Great Liberation

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Prelude

Love is where we came from. Love is why we're here. Love is where we're going to.

In the beginning that has no end, there was love.

Before words. Before action. Before thought as we knew it.

There was beingness: the fusion of creation and matter with itself.

And it is in us, deep in our bodies. You can see it, shining in our eyes.

In the beginning, before we came here, when we were together in soul, there was love. And the beginning is where we return to, where we end.

Love is the work, love is the return.

So why do we come here at all?

To learn to love, under the most difficult circumstances of all. To bring, to birth love. And to further love – knowing it is at

the heart of our evolution as a species. Our only evolution is love.

And when we have achieved that, when we have finally opened ourselves – we die. When we have done what we can with this mortal body and our mortal minds. It may only be in the last invisible seconds of our passing...

And then we are released to where our journey takes us on. To where there are new horizons and where we have new choices.

Because the Kingdom of Love is vast. It encompasses everything. The way earth meets sky, and sky expands the earth in its rolling sea of cloud and blue...

Love is where we came from. Love is why we're here. Love is where we're going to.

Introduction

The Crisis and the Opportunity

Without love, humanity could not exist for a day

– Erich Fromm

Love is our birthright, deep in the cells of our bodies. Love is our most natural state, it is the most natural place in the world to be – when we are in it. But we are not used to being in it. Our normal state is one of distance, and distance breeds a particular distortion, a negative seeing and a negative expectation of any stranger: our first reaction is more likely to be enmity than openness. That distance is one we have to cross. It is our wound, our sickness and our abyss.

So, we are in crisis. The vessel of our world is simmering over an invisible fire. But do we know what this crisis is? We can think of it materially as a crisis of resources and ecologically as a crisis of survival, but if we can think of it essentially in terms of relationship, we can see that above all it is a crisis of feeling. A crisis of feeling, disabled by fear.

The fear stems from our alienation and distance. We are afraid to feel, afraid that we will be rejected, that we will be alone, unable to survive. We are constantly trying to insure ourselves against abandonment and pain. However, because this goes against the spirit of life, it creates a contraction in which our own spark is stifled. We lose the energy to break out, to be spontaneous, fluid and mobile as feeling itself is. We become rigid, not so much living in form as subsumed by it, while at the same time persuading ourselves and each other that this is, after all, reality. But this reality is breaking down.

Our need for love, and to understand love, has never been greater than now. The problems confronting us make us realize that we literally cannot survive without it. The Greek word for 'crisis' also means 'opportunity'. This is our opportunity.

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As a Tina Turner song asked, 'What's love got to do with it?' I took it as a provocative question. 'Everything,' I wanted to say every time I heard the refrain. And it set me thinking.

As I looked around, my first point of reference was the relationships in front of me, which increasingly, it seemed, were not working. All too often, the relationships seemed smaller than the sum of the two people involved. Couples I knew were constantly at odds with each other, in frozen denial, moving apart or actually separating, until everywhere I looked I seemed to be seeing a version of the same thing: relationships as we've known them are no longer working.

I found myself asking, 'Where is the passion, the generosity, the forgiveness, the breadth?' Love can change our entire perception of the world, but the love we know seems to be isolated, limited and impermanent.

At the same time I started to notice something else. It wasn't simply that we weren't any good at relationships – there was more to it than that. There was a reason why they were being apparently subverted – and not simply so we could find more ingenious ways of patching them up. Something deeper and more troubling was going on. We were being invited – or even forced – to see relationships in a new light.

That is where this book began, ten years or so ago now, with an undefined but increasingly urgent sense that a structure we knew (or thought we knew) was going to have to change. And there was alchemy. While researching my previous book,¹ I realized that far from being an obscurely pictured mediaeval system, alchemy not only has so much to say to us today about wholeness, imagination and healing, but does so specifically about man–woman relationship as key to its

process – a journey and initiation through death and rebirth, separation and reunion, where both partners are changed and can attain their true or ‘royal’ potential.

Inspired by Jung’s work,² which took alchemy seriously as psychological and transformative reality, I was excited by the therapeutic possibilities as well as the amazing creativity and poetry inherent within it. So, with seeds and hints of this present book in my previous one, it became the natural framework and ‘flask’ (or container) for this exploration.

At the same time I was questioning everything. Were couples a thing of the past, still lingering on? How could marriages exist and meaningfully survive? What did it mean to love more than one person? How could we open to a greater loving in which we could genuinely grow in freedom? These were the questions, I felt, that we were being invited to ask. This was how we were being invited to see relationships. And not just from our own convenient view, emotionally or intellectually, but from spirit. That was where the change was coming.

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Alchemy is a word that has resurfaced recently in our general awareness. Most of us know it has to do with turning base metal (or lead) into gold and that it began in Egypt as an experimental laboratory process that increasingly - after the Renaissance - became a metaphor for our own inward being and its process. But what most of us don’t know is that the alchemical process is basically about a man and a woman – Sol, the masculine, and Luna, the feminine – and that it has everything to say about relationships: our coming together, our separating, our reuniting, and all the work we are quickened into doing to keep the relationship alive and moving – that is, if we choose to.

Understanding alchemy in this inner sense helps us to deepen our relationships from a personality or ego level to a level of soul and spirit. And because alchemy sees relationship as a process rather than something to be simply ‘fixed’ when it goes wrong, it makes us less afraid of our difficulties: the difficulties between us and the difficult parts we all have in us. From an alchemical point of view it is precisely these difficulties that – with engagement rather than denial – can be openings to greater awareness, sensitivity and aliveness in its labour of transmutation and transformation.

The work of alchemy essentially takes place in a contained vessel, also referred to as a flask, a retort, an alembic. We can understand this container metaphorically as a safe space that allows us to open up to greater intensity, intimacy and creativity. This is the fire or ‘heat’ of the process. We also need containment, a safe and sacred space, to be able to open to our own higher level of awareness. So the flask is basic, and we each need to take responsibility for it. The opposite of containment in this sense is chaos and in extreme cases, psychosis.

Among the many illustrations of laboratory equipment, we also find the ‘double pelican’—literally, two connected flasks—which specifically relates to the couple who do the work. This is both the alchemist and his female or male co-worker (the soror mystica or frater mysterium) and, inwardly, our alchemical lovers: Sol and Luna.

Alchemy also involves a third person or body who accompanies Sol and Luna at every stage: the ever-present, ever-shifting, ever-changing Mercurius, who is both instinctual and spiritual, androgynous (or ‘hermaphrodite’) and bisexual. He is both genders and more. He points to us each having unique gender; we are all composed of masculine and feminine – and are not simply, so to speak, from Mars or Venus. And in relationship to Sol and Luna, we may imagine him like this moving between the shadow beneath them and the light above them:

Alchemy is traditionally based on a heterosexual expression, but it is also about the masculine and feminine in all of us, which is why it shows Mercurius as androgynous and bisexual. It calls us as men and women to open to our contrasexual (i.e. our ‘other sex’) nature, and it affirms our sexuality as bisexual (containing both) and fluid. Our sexuality changes through our lifetime as a mirror of our wholeness and what we need to experience as a result of our sexual persuasion at any time. If you are in a gay or lesbian relationship, you can read the journey of Sol and Luna for yourself, with your partner as the other sex. While both of you will be Sol (men) or Luna (women), the other sex journey will also be relevant in terms of what gender you feel you inhabit in relationship to your partner. Gay or lesbian relationships both emphasize a love of their own male or femaleness, physically experienced. Our own sexual nature inwardly as a man or woman not only contains the other gender, but points towards a condition of unique gender in each of us as individuals.

As an art and a science, alchemy is a spiritual process of transformation that reaches deep into matter, through our bodies. That means it includes our mental processes, our feelings and imagination, as well as our physical being, our sexuality and instinct. It is a truly holistic process and its goal is wholeness; the gold it creates is a quality of enlightenment in the body that is about being here in this world, fully awake, alive and loving.

Alchemical gold is not material gold. But it is no less real. We can think of its gold as being made of light and darkness, and requiring the existence of each. Relationships, it says, need both our light and darkness – our love, our vision and our difficulty and pain – if gold is to be formed between us.

And it is in and through this that alchemy sees that our relationships, like journeys, have a life of their own that are guided by what goes beyond us – however we name or understand that.

Alchemy, which opened the doors to the unconscious hundreds of years before Freud and psychology came into being, and which was wisely championed by C. G. Jung in his pioneering *Psychology and Alchemy*, is a therapeutic process and a spiritual path. It brings the psychological and the spiritual together, which is another aspect of its relevance for us today. The stages of ‘the Work’ or opus, like chapters with their sections and sub-sections, have a profound natural logic that makes sense to our emotional rather than rational being, to our creative intuition as opposed to our intellect. The alchemical process has an unfolding ‘rightness’, then, as people I know who have experienced it (also in my workshops) have stated time and again. The sense is often of coming to recognize something – an event or phrase of one’s life – in a new way that is also meaningful. ‘Ah, that’s what was happening – I see it now.’

Alchemy also takes us beyond what we know into new ground as well as deepened ground, just as intimate relationships do, where love is our path.

This book is that path. So taking alchemy as ‘inner alchemy’ where we are the process, I have mapped each of the main stages, applying them in detail to relationships and the issues that come up for us in them that challenge us to deepen, to shed our skins, to open our hearts and to extend our boundaries – above all, to journey from a love we know that is conditional towards a love we are beginning to know and need to discover (now more than ever) that is unconditional, that ‘is’ itself and that is greater than anything we have ever known.

So I begin with the love we know: falling in love in *coniunctio* (which means ‘joining’ or ‘coming together’). Relationships as we know are (hopefully) wonderful in the beginning, but that isn’t where they remain. In alchemy, this takes us to the *nigredo* (which means ‘blackening’), where we discover our partners are not all we want them to be, which is where the difficulty that is also the death of the ego begins. *Nigredo* is the hardest part of the process. But our story is still only beginning. We then move into the softening and whitening realm of *solutio* (‘solving’, as in solution), with its emphasis on the soul itself freed from the control of the ego personality; with feeling, with the feminine (it is Luna’s realm) and with purification. These two stages together complete the first part of the work.

We then cross over into what alchemy calls ‘the Greater Work’, which is where we really grow up (as well as down) into adulthood and where we spiritually awaken. In *coagulatio* (which literally means ‘coagulation’, with its connotation of grounding as well as thickening), we learn what it means to be separate people who need to stand on their own and find the other in themselves – in other words, as men, finding the feminine in ourselves, and as women, finding the masculine in ourselves. As well as seeing our partner(s) on their own path of development, that is their soul’s individuality, this also opens us up to the realm of the ‘inner marriage’ which is absolutely vital if any enduring ‘outer marriage’ is to take place or be sustained.

At the same time during this longest of our four main stages, I introduce and debate some of the key questions I have already mentioned. What does being in a couple mean? What does freedom mean within this? What holds our relationship together then? These include what I call ‘erotic soul relationships’ and also the challenges of community in extending our horizons of love and loving.

That greater dimension is the realm of the last stage, the *rubedo* (with its connotations of ruby as well as red and rose), with its rainbow bridge linking heaven and Earth which ‘makes whole’ again – and which is also the place where alchemy places the wedding which has been prepared and worked for. This alchemical or ‘chymical’ wedding is the true joining of our couple after all they have been through. It is the conscious as opposed to the unconscious marriage. And it is here too, as we will see, that we can understand that marriage is also about connecting the whole of life – facing outwards together and not just inwards – and ultimately the whole of the world, seen and unseen. Here we are awake and alive, in connection and ‘in relationship’ (rather than out of it), and this aliveness, this vitality, is part of what alchemy means by ‘gold’ as an awakened and enlightened state. It is also where a tremendous self-renewing energy called the Elixir of Life becomes available, as well as the magic and wisdom that alchemy famously calls ‘the Philosopher’s Stone’ It is here too as men and women that we can fulfil something of our true potential – royal as we are as kings and queens in our true spiritual (and human) being.

And we must take the journey to find out.

The various suggestions and exercises at the end of each chapter are designed to encourage you in this both individually and in your relationship(s). My suggestion is that you work with them sequentially either over a period of time (while you read this book), or else focus on a particular area, having read it through, according to where you feel you are with your partner at this time.

It is useful to remember that where you may be individually is not where your relationship is. Equally your partner may also be individually at a different stage from you - this may also be what attracted you. However your relationship - and its 'third body' that you make together - will be identifiably at one and each of these stages. The 'double pelican' is a useful image to retain and reflect on here in terms of the structure of what follows, and how you understand and work with it.

To summarize and also introduce then, to end and begin at the same time, here is a map of the serpentine journey you are about to make ... and perhaps not for the first time:

light, recognition

first love, falling in love

conuinctio

'the relationship we recognize'

into the Black

descending

nigredo

'the relationship we dread'

Whitening

purifying

solutio

'the relationship we dream of'

Yellowing/Green

grounding

coagulatio

separation, differentiation

(the Desert Journey)

'the relationship we fear and resist'

Reddening/Purple/Gold

union, synthesis

('as above, so below')

the Wedding

rubedo

'love's relationship with us'

ouroboros

(the great snake)

the end that is the beginning

of a new cycle