

The Mermaid's Horn

Reflections on Art and Healing

Dr. Jacqueline Senator Orcutt



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Reflections on art and healing

By J. A. Senator Orcutt

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Taught by Dr. Donohue At Saybrook University

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I began my experiential inquiry into art as healing through the use of sculpture. My intention was to use the depth method of art creation to facilitate the process of unfolding my personal healing. This paper will follow my progress using depth inquiry through the art process to discover the deeper level of the psyche. The focus of this paper will be limited to my art creation and meditation experiences and my personal reflections in relation to personal healing. This paper will review the methods within the depth process and reflect on insights and discoveries

Approaching The Mermaid's Horn

I was encouraged by this assignment to do an experiential paper that required I produce a piece of art with the intention of healing. My son and I create art daily—he's four, so art is more about creativity and freedom. I have always made art. I grew up in a household filled with daily expression of artistic outpourings; drawings and poetry on little notes left for us by our mom was common, as was the ample display of artwork created by each family member—paintings, clay sculpture, drawings, models, paper dolls with cardboard houses, poems and illustrated stories. Perhaps this is why I feel art is very much a part of me. However, with the many demands of my varied roles to play, my art sometimes takes a backseat. For this reason, I felt there might be something to be discovered, perhaps awakened or healed, if I were willing to commit to the process of inquiry.

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As I began to conceive what my project might look like, I found myself being drawn to the process of sculpting, specifically stone carving. Sculpture and painting have been my two primary means of artistic expression. Although I seem to find myself painting more often, perhaps because it is more accessible in terms of set up and clean up, especially if it's watercolor. At the beginning I found myself in a strange place of suspension where I felt drawn to sculpt, yet there seemed to be a slight resistance or maybe inertia that kept me from initially taking the leap. Jung said, "Enlightenment is not imagining figures of light but making the darkness conscious" (Jung, 1968, p. 265). By placing my attention on to the perceived resistance, my inner process was spurred to shift it away as it had no foundation within the light of my awareness. My hesitation shifted and I felt ready to sculpt again. It has been ten years since I worked with stone. I love clay— it is childlike and malleable, but there is a special kinship I feel with stone that make the experience of sculpting deeply satisfying and transformational.

Creating the Mermaid's Horn

I had thought about painting, but the pull to sculpt was overwhelming. My mind kept persisting and I began to feel pulled to work on a particular piece of stone. Perhaps something in my psyche craved completion or maybe it was the wielding of the hammer with a great sense of kinship to my ancestors. The process of sculpting took hold of me filling my dreams for two nights with carved movements in the stone, possibilities and enticement of things to come. The imagery of the sculpture also appeared in my meditations showing ways to evolve the curves and structure organically.

Jung said, “Enlightenment is not imagining figures of light but making the darkness conscious”

— *Carl Jung*

I had an alchemical experience while working on the stone both literally and metaphorically. The art piece is a hand craved stone sculpture made of serpentine alabaster (please see Appendix I). As I was sculpting the stone using a technique of chipping with the chisel and hammer, a certain part of the stone revealed slight iron ore veins in the serpentine alabaster that I was unaware of. As I struck the chisel, the stone lit up from within, glowing and sending sparks into the air. As I looked down, I could see newly formed bright silver metal painted across the stone and then a smell of sulfur met my nose as smoke rose over my head. The silver so shiny and bright against the pale green stone turned out to be steel (please see Appendix II). Like a lightening strike from my hammer I had changed iron into steel a process that required a temperature change of 1,600° F (871° C). It was truly amazing to witness. That night I had a dream where a floating image hovered over an entire lucid dream, an unusual experience. The image was of two pieces of raw metal material forming a tee-pee shape over a bright and shiny metal sword. Upon waking I did some research and found the shape matched a small Japanese sword made through forging. Forging is the process in which metal is shaped by hammering. I have done metal sculpture in the past, but I have never thought about sculpting and metal work by forging. I must admit there is something cathartic about wielding the hammer and seeing the red glow followed by sparks of light. An enlightening experience I never would have guessed to find through this creative process, an unexpected joy.

The symbolic image of the hammer along with the alchemical experience during sculpting has brought the mythic imagery of Thor and Breo-saighit to life. These two myths have come up many times through my depth work and have been active in my psyche as of late. Breo-saighit (pronounced Bree-O-say-it) is known as “a goddess of poetry, traditionally worshiped by the poets, a goddess of healing, a goddess of the martial arts, a patron of warfare or *briga*, and a goddess of smith-work” (Stepanich, 1996, p. 46). Thor has been seen racing through our hallways as my son dons his mantle and carries a *Mjölnir* (pronounced mee-all-near) the magical hammer saving me from all types of monsters. I found these myths were more connected to the art process of sculpting and perhaps, less relevant to the finished work.

Healing through Art

The mermaid's horn was born from an idea that was inspired by the color of the stone. I envisioned a horn that was metaphorically used to call through the depth by a native of the deep, a mermaid. Similar to the air born trumpet wielding angel, only this was its counterpart from the sea. It always had the title ‘the mermaid's horn’, it felt deliberate. In fact, I had brought this stone thirteen years ago, name the piece and then left it untouched until now. The experience felt as though I was reclaiming a part of myself, which of course, is healing. It felt as though I reclaimed a certain sense of inner strength which was accompanied by an empowered feeling of independence. I had not expected to receive this benefit. Through further introspection and research of the meaning of the symbols, I found greater details revealed. Healing was facilitated through conscious contemplation of the art process, artwork and its symbolism.

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The horn symbolically represents for me a sense of power, protection, strength and maturity. According to Hans Biedermann (1994) horns are the animal's weapons and therefore characterize strength and aggressiveness. Horns were frequently used as a visible symbol of powers, found in many depictions of horned deities, such as early Holocene North African cave paintings that used wild buffalo horns with a disk between the horns, thought to represent a seat of power (Biedermann 1994). Another similar example is found in the ancient Egyptian Goddess Hathor, The goddess of the Heavens, who is portrayed with the head of a cow and a sun disc between the horns. Michelangelo's chose to use horns to illustrate power in his statue of *Moses* with horns (Biedermann 1994). All of these examples show the horn as a symbol of power and majesty. The horn is a symbol of divine strength and deliverance in the Gospel of Luke in the Christian Bible: "And has raised up for us the horn of deliverance in the house of David His son—Luke 1:69" (Fenton, 1903). Lastly, horns were used in many cultures as ceremonial containers for sacrificial beverages (Biedermann, 1994). The symbolic representation of the horn as power is held deep within the psyche.

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Mermaids are mythical creatures of sea legends, half human, half fish, known for their bewitching beauty and mischievous temperament. Metaphorically the mermaid could be considered a navigator of the depths of consciousness. During the Middle Ages the Church sought to discredit the majority of Pagan deities, but kept the mermaid as a symbol of licentiousness and as a reminder of the perils the temptation of the flesh posed to the immortal soul (Gachot, 1996). "In alchemy the mermaid is a guide to the nature of the human mind, representing both what is human and what is animal and the necessity of reconciling the two into a coherent and last whole" (Gachot, 1996, p. 116). This dualistic nature allows the mermaid to act as a guide through the wilderness of nature and humanity. Mermaids appear in alchemical texts and engraving as guides leading the alchemist on his way. Many alchemists used the mermaid as a guiding principle representing the archetype of nature. Gachot recalled an alchemists' quote found beneath an image of a mermaid, "Let nature be your guide; follow her with your art willingly, like a footman, For you err if she is not your companion on your way" (1996, p. 116). The mermaid is not only guide and guardian, but also benefactor, a much elevated perspective compared to Christian viewpoints. Jung viewed the alchemists' work as a projection of the inner workings reflecting a process of maturation and development within the psyche. Jung's wife Emma wrote that as a symbol the mermaid wants to "entangle" us in "real relationships" (Gachot, 1996, p. 116). The mermaid appears to guide the mind back to the treasure within the psyche, and perhaps to a trueness of heart.

"Let nature be your guide; follow her with your art willingly, like a footman, For you err if she is not your companion on your way."

— Gachot - an alchemists' quote beneath an image of a mermaid

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After researching the many different interpretations and symbolic meaning of horns and mermaids, I dropped it all to sit with the piece (please see Appendix III). By sitting with the piece and allowing it to enter into my mental space as a symbolic image instead of an object I sculpted, I found new insights revealed. This part of the art process allowed the piece to facilitate a deeper form of introspection. McNiff interprets “sticking with the image” as a restatement of the Gnostic passage “recognize what is before your eyes, and what is hidden will be revealed to you,” taken from the Gospel of Thomas (McNiff, 1998). C.G. Jung taught the therapeutic value of holding fast to the image. Murry Stein reminds us, it echoes

“the classical Jungian meaning of individuation—becoming what you already are potentially, but now more deeply and more consciously. The art process, as a form of individuation, requires the enabling power of symbols which lift up and make available contents of the unconscious that have been obscured from view” (Stein, 1998, p. 177).

"Recognize what is before your eyes, and what is hidden will be revealed to you."

— *Gnostic passage from Gospel of Thomas*

Through the process of contemplation previously unknown aspects become integrated. I am grateful for this practice as the piece revealed hidden strength, and insight into my hopes, dreams and desires, and most certainly validated the need to do more art.

Mermaid's Horn as Art

It had been a very long time since I presented any of my artwork to be viewed. I must admit I had some reservations about sharing this particular piece because it felt somewhat taboo, perhaps because it seemed unintentionally sensual and provocative. Two friends volunteered to give their honest response to my sculpture. I asked them what they found in the piece, what it inspired in them and how it made them feel. They responded to the piece similarly. During the viewing I paid attention to the adjectives and comments the two were making without responding or conversing. I noticed they seemed to take on a playful attitude in response to the piece.

“Organic” was the first response from both of them, along with “fertile” and “spiral”. Other comments made about the piece included, “caduceus, snakes, healing medicine, helix, DNA, union, propagation, progeny, penetrating, phallic, seed-like, lifting energy, and vibrancy”. These comments spurred a conversation between them about the yin/yang quality within the art and how it appeared differently from different angles. This conversation continued into the male / female representation found within each of us, which made me think of the anima/animus. There were also comments made about the stone itself; its smooth texture and the great color. They seemed to speak more about the art metaphorically in symbolic terms than physical dimensions. During their viewing I noticed that they each enjoyed touching the stone allowing their fingers to follow the curves. The piece seemed to request them to touch its smooth surface, like needing to touch the sea with our toes at the beach.

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The manner in which the viewing naturally unfolded reminded me of the idea of witnessing. Allen (1995) outlines this process as inviting a witness to attend to the images in silence. Asking the image what you want to know and then allow the process to unfold. Although I did not follow this protocol, something very similar happened naturally. Perhaps, this evolved from the way the art was presented or the way I asked the questions. The process unfolded organically and had similar benefits as if it were planned. “The witness does not judge, criticize, extol, reject, or evaluate the images. To witness is to be-with. The witness is changed in this being-with, enlarged by witnessing the unfamiliar or strengthened by witnessing the resonate” (Allen, 1995, p. 110). The experience had an alchemical feeling to it, as the piece seemed to affect us all, as my friends and I observed the piece. Each viewer was able to reflect on the piece as an object that evoked some symbolic or metaphoric expression of a feeling or an idea. I had intended to produce a metaphoric representation of depth work and it became a true alchemical piece for me. My two friends revealed some aspects to the piece I had not reached myself at the time of the viewing, which made their comments seem even more relevant and synchronistic. I had not expected to receive this form of validation.

Perspectives on The Mermaid's Horn

I experienced many moments of healing by participating in this experiential inquiry. The healing of resistance to follow my heart's desire when beginning the project was the first healing aspect revealed through the process. This allowed me to see that I often allowed myself to be dissuaded by my own perceived inner resistance that had no foundation. I also realized that sometimes it is not really resistance per se, but perhaps a build up of inertia that needs to be broken free from. The need to preserve seemed a vital message that granted me a certain solace in pursuing my future projects. I feel very grateful for this insight.

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The alchemical experience that I had while making of the art piece was truly awe-inspiring. I had not imagined anything like that occurring. I experienced a physical transformation in the stone that had a metaphoric impact. It was especially powerful when my dreaming mind highlighted the process during sleep. I believe these effects made the inquiry fruitful and deeply introspective. It revealed the full engagement of my psyche within the art process for healing and I am grateful. I witnessed alchemy within the entire process from start to finish. The feedback I received validated much of my inner work and seemed to extend the presence of alchemy through the elements of synchronicity.

I found many healing references by contemplating the symbolism surrounding the piece. The healing process rekindled a certain sense of inner strength. The experience far surpassed my expectation. The process has ignited a feeling of being drawn to continue sculpting and to find more time for my art. Every part of the process was enjoyable including the sore arm muscles. I have reawakened a true love.

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Appendix I



"The Mermaid's Horn" Original Stone Sculpture by Jacqueline Senator Orcutt 2014

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Appendix II



Alchemical perspective steel created in the stone

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Original Stone Sculpture by Jacqueline Senator Orcutt 2014

Appendix III



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Original Stone Sculpture by Jacqueline Senator Orcutt 2014

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