

# A HEALING SPACE

Befriending Ourselves in Difficult Times

MATT LICATA, PHD

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# INTRODUCTION

## *An Invitation into a Healing Space*

AT SOME POINT ALONG THE WAY, each of us will be asked to revision the ideas that have accompanied us to this moment in our lives. Although at times the call arrives quietly and slowly, as a whisper guiding us into new territory, for many it comes as an unexpected visitor, erupting in the night as we find ourselves in transition, confused, angry, heartbroken, uncertain, or depressed. However it arrives, it is a reminder that even our most sacred identities and beliefs tend to become encrusted over time, worn-out symbols of a living reality no longer so alive. Somehow what was clear only days or even moments ago has lost its meaning and is no longer able to accompany us into the next phase.

The recurring theme we will explore in this book is how we can meet the challenges of life in a new way imbued with curiosity, wisdom, and compassion. In replacing the old circuitry of shame, self-aggression, and self-abandonment with holding, kindness, and attunement, we discover the sacredness of “ordinary” life, which turns out not to be so ordinary after all. In this unearthing, even our most difficult, confusing, and painful experiences are filled with intelligence and in some unexpected way turn out to be guardians on the path. As we make the journey together, we will uncover and experiment with new perspectives, tend mindfully and with tenderness to our immediate experience, and discover fresh layers of purpose and meaning.

*A Healing Space* is not a book to read cover to cover in one sitting or to struggle to understand conceptually but to pick up from time to

time in response to an inner call. I hope that it inspires you to slow down and listen to the unique invitation being presented to you at this precise moment in your life. Trust your intuition and internal guidance system as you decide which chapters to focus on, read a few paragraphs, put the book down often, and allow yourself to be moved from within as you meet with new images, feelings, and discoveries. I love the idea of you taking the book out into nature, to sit on the earth and ask her to choose the page, the paragraph, and the guidance for which your soul is thirsty. Read the book not only with an open, critical mind but with your entire body, the softness of your heart, and the creativity of your imagination. Let it penetrate you, cell by cell. There is no need to struggle to “understand” every word in some linear, rational way, but I invite you to enter a visionary world with the ideas, emotions, and images evoked, making a journey with them as kindred travelers of the mystery.

My words are more *poetic* than *prescriptive*, meaning I will not lead you step-by-step through too many exercises or provide detailed instructions. There are many gifted teachers and guides of meditation, prayer, visualization, and deep inner work from whom you might benefit along the way. Rather, my intention is that the book be a companion during times of darkness, confusion, and uncertainty, or in *any* moment when you find yourself longing for inspiration, depth, and perspective. It's not intended to be a substitute for your direct experience, but a caring friend, a whisper inviting you back home, which in some paradoxical way you have never truly left.

Although I hope to invite you into deeper participation in the mystery as it appears in and as your life, I do not have any answers for you. Rather, I see my role as helping to illuminate the immensity and even magic of the questions themselves. The nature of these questions is unique and communicated in a language and in images created specifically for you. My words are only fingers pointing to a moon already rising within you, and my sole intention is to guide you back into the

creativity and intelligence saturating your cells at this very moment, whether you feel worthy of it or believe you are a mess or have totally fallen apart. Even in these moments, you are being held by something vast. Let us provide a temple or sanctuary for your own wisdom-essence to emerge as we go through the book together.

Your journey is unprecedented, and you will likely never be ultimately satisfied by a partial or secondhand path. My aim in this book is to invite you into a radical new level of trust in your own experience and into the courageous hero's or heroine's journey, always shimmering with life as it arises freshly in the here and now.

Throughout *A Healing Space*, I will make use of the language, metaphors, and images of diverse traditions such as alchemy, neuroscience, contemplative spirituality, and the poetic imagination to support our journey into the unknown together. I apologize ahead of time to any actual alchemists, neuroscientists, or scholars of religion (I am none of these) because my engagement with these traditions is often outside convention. I am not asking you to take these images *literally*—I do not myself—but as metaphors pointing to a living reality deep within you. There is no need to adopt any new belief system but only to be curious, to open and play with the language along with me as we dream and imagine together, becoming poets and alchemists of a new world.

By integrating a variety of perspectives into our inquiry, we honor the integrity, complexity, and majesty of the psyche, the infinite nature of the heart, and the vast depths of the soul. Each mode of investigation provides a distinctive lens through which to view and approach the magnificence of life and the vastness that holds us all. Although these various ways of exploring experience are at times contradictory, we can make use of the contradictions to enrich our discoveries and more deeply appreciate how miraculous the human person truly is. In one moment, scientific language might seem the most provocative and attuned, and in the next, meditative, alchemical, or poetic expression

will be the doorway we step through together into new perception, openheartedness, and self-discovery.

## ALCHEMY AND UNEARTHING LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Although you might have some experience with psychological work, mindfulness, and meditation as viable pathways of healing and spiritual development, alchemy and its potential application to our lives in the modern world could be new to you. It is beyond the scope of this book to provide a historical survey of the tradition of alchemy, or any sort of comprehensive investigation of its processes and goals. For our purposes, we will explore alchemy's practical relevance to our primary theme of discovering the sacred within the ordinary and mining the intelligence buried within our symptoms, emotions, and most challenging experience. This is something alchemy is uniquely able to help us with, in ways that might not be immediately apparent. In this way, the entire alchemical "opus" (the word the alchemists used to refer to their work) is an invitation into "a healing space" where each of us is the alchemist of our own lives, conducting and artfully tending to an experiment of creative discovery and the unfolding of soul.

Although at the external level, alchemists were involved with the conversion of base metals into silver or gold, we will focus on relating to our inner experience with an alchemical sensibility, making use of alchemical images, metaphors, language, and processes as rich, evocative lenses through which to approach our lives. In this way, our work will be to convert experience we have deemed painful, problematic, and confusing into wisdom-filled, sacred expressions of our human souls, providing critical guidance and meaning along the way. By doing so, we unearth the *aurum philosophicum* (philosophical gold), or the inner jewels that are buried deep within us. The true alchemist was not interested in converting lead to gold to increase his or her external

wealth but to “redeem” the lead to its majestic state, that of spirit. This notion of “redemption” is an important one in alchemy and has parallels in our own lives, where we’re invited to “redeem” difficult and challenging experiences in such a way that their wisdom may be revealed—their purpose, meaning, and roles in our own healing.

Although there are many ancient alchemical texts, dating back to early Greek, Egyptian, and Arabic sources, my engagement with alchemy has arisen primarily out of the work of two great contemporary alchemical psychologists, C. G. Jung and James Hillman (see the bibliography for a list of their works cited). I owe a great debt to these two pioneers and explorers, without whom our modern psychological understanding of alchemy would likely not have been possible. Because alchemy is much less familiar than the other streams of inquiry discussed, here I would like to plant a seed for our future explorations together.

## THE CREATIVE ROLE OF DISSOLUTION

One of the common ways alchemical work begins is through the operation of *solutio* (solution), where the “stuff,” or material, of our lives (i.e., our various life circumstances, relationships, emotional vulnerabilities, health issues, family dynamics, experiences with work and career) dissolves and returns to its “original state.”<sup>1</sup> Through this process, it becomes a “solution” in both senses of the word: a liquid that remains after a breakdown of essential elements *and* a response to a challenge. Isolating and working with this “original state” is essential on the journey of transformation, said to take form as a substance the alchemists referred to as the *prima materia*, the most basic “material” we have to work with as archaeologists of the inner world.<sup>2</sup>

This dissolution can express itself through the ending of a relationship or job, for example, or through a depression or dark night, anxiety or other psychological symptoms, vivid fantasies and dreams, difficult

emotions or sensations in the body, or existentially through the loss of meaning and purpose. Although we might romanticize this activity as evidence of spiritual opportunity or even as the appearance of grace, it comes with a certain devastation and is not something we are likely to enjoy or call forth voluntarily. This movement in psyche is not oriented in “improving” our lives, helping us adapt or fit in, or in what we would ordinarily think of as “self-development” but as a required darkening we must go through to begin our work anew, with fresh vision.

In contemplating the various *solutio* moments of my own life—the losses and reorganizations I have gone through in my work, family, intimate relationships, and physical health—they were not times of contentment and flow but of revolution, in which I wasn’t sure if I would make it through to the other side. In many ways, I did not, at least the “me” who was there at the start of the process. In the same way, as the material in the vessel was worked on by the alchemist—by way of the various processes and operations—it would inevitably change into something else; what the alchemist started with never remained the same and was often rendered completely unrecognizable as it underwent the journey of transmutation. Likewise with our own inner process; there are times when what we have counted on to provide value, certainty, and meaning falls apart and is no longer able to support our deepest attitudes and convictions about ourselves and the world. The reality is that the material of our lives is always in flux. Although it is tempting to view this natural reorganization as an error or mistake, a sign that something has gone “wrong” or that we have failed, this discovery is, paradoxically, the basis for renewal and transformation.

A certain kind of death occurs by way of dissolution, revealing that the process of healing is not *only* a movement of creativity and light but also of destruction and the dark. Part and parcel of this disbanding is the discovery that life is no longer envisioned as something for us to “master” or to “perfect” but to enter afresh in each moment, willing



to be awed and surprised at what we discover. There is no final landing place where we can rest free from the possibility that the rug can (and will) be removed from underneath us at any time, exposing dimensions of the soul hidden until now.

It is a humbling path, devastating and illuminating simultaneously. Enlivening and at times disorienting. To paraphrase Jung, making the darkness conscious is not what most of us had in mind when we started the journey.<sup>3</sup> We might wonder from time to time whether this is the path for us, only to remember that we are unwilling to settle for a half-life any longer; only the full spectrum is going to meet the longing placed within us. The call is to a greater light found only in embodied, compassionate tending to the dark in all its forms.

If we do not engage consciously in the process of dissolution (and even if we do), life will bring dissolution *to* us, by way of transition, change, and psychic upheaval of all kinds: the ending of a relationship we thought would last forever, a concerning health diagnosis, the loss of a job, an unexpected depression, or the inability to find meaning in our experience. Without the healing waters of dissolution, we remain stuck in habitual consciousness, subject to the narrow band of the historical lenses through which we have come to perceive self, others, and world. Through the illumination of these lenses we can harness the creative power of the imagination, the wildness of the heart, and the courage and vision to dream a new dream.

## INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORY

The purpose of *A Healing Space* is to inspire you to open to the unexpected wisdom, creativity, and beauty in your immediate experience, through the eyes and the heart of the alchemist you are. I hope that it serves as a supportive, attuned guide and friend, inviting you into the experiential realization that you are *not* a project to be solved but a mystery coming into form. How we can best honor that mystery and

allow its qualities to inform and illuminate our lives is something we'll be exploring as we make this journey together into uncharted territory. The love of the truth makes the work of the alchemist possible, and it is my intention that through our time together this love will come alive in ways that might surprise you.

It is essential that you have an honest dialogue with yourself about what healing means *specifically* for you; this is where secondhand knowledge and any sort of prefabricated description of the path must be replaced by the fire of direct experience, even when that experience is one of uncertainty, disappointment, hopelessness, and doubt. A recurring theme in *A Healing Space* is that these unwanted visitors are allies in disguise, emissaries of wisdom and creativity sent by psyche to further introduce us to the majesty of what we are. Although we are conditioned to believe that transformation and healing are products of finding the right “answer,” the invitation here is to break open to the vastness of the question itself. For here, in this illuminated brokenness, the water of life will be found.

True healing is not a state in which we become liberated from feeling but freer and flexible to experience it more fully. It is the willingness to make a journey into the darker, deeper, more complex, and more nuanced dimensions of the psychic spectrum, to touch the fullness of what it means to have taken birth here, to allow in the implications of this and to use these discoveries to connect with others. Through this exploration, we come to discover that although suffering feels and is personal, it is *also* archetypal and, as the Buddha noted, universal in human experience. The invitation is to allow our broken hearts, confused minds, and vulnerable emotional bodies to serve as a bridge to a place where we can make embodied, loving contact with the “others” in our lives—not only the external others but the inner others who have become lost along the way.

Throughout *A Healing Space*, we'll travel together inside our moods, thoughts, fantasies, dreams, memories, imagination, bodies,

impulses, and feelings and allow ourselves to be touched by their colors, fragrances, and essences. To do this will require patience and courage, but more than anything a new kind of curiosity and the willingness to take a risk: to dare to see that there is intelligence in our neurosis, wisdom in our symptoms, and sacred data in our emotions. It doesn't mean that we will "like" what we find or that we can or even want to "accept" it, not to mention "love" it. The commitment is to envision our lives in a new way, befriend ourselves and our experience, and no longer abandon ourselves in times of intensity, confusion, and challenge. To discover firsthand the rarity of having a human body, a sometimes-broken heart, and a miraculous, sensitive nervous system. To apprehend the breathtaking reality of a sunset fully experienced, just how astounding it is to have the capacity to listen, feel, sense, weep, fail, and succeed. To fall to the ground and get back up, only to fall again and behold the mercy of that cycle once again.

This exploration is not oriented in transcending our vulnerability—fleeing into a state of power, untouchability, and control—or safely hiding in some protected spiritual cocoon where we've risen above it all. There's no "mastering" here. Life is not something to master but to stand in awe of and participate in. We do this by way of the mind and heart of the beginner, the one who knows it is possible (likely) in any moment for life to reorganize and rearrange all our constructed spiritual identities and fantasies. Life can and will do this, if we're lucky, throughout our entire lives, as it excavates deeper territories of the heart.

It is not about taking refuge in spiritual concepts, even noble ones such as "the present moment" because as we all know we can hide out anywhere, and "the present moment" is no exception. It is a particularly rich and subtle place to hide. But it is pointing to something wilder than that. Something more magical. More raw. *At times, even more painful.* In this revisioning, pain is something we enter consciously, as a

curious traveler of the unknown, committed to participate and behold in more and more subtlety and depth the entire range of human experience as it unfolds here.

It's not a life that always feels safe, peaceful, and confirms to our most deeply conditioned hopes, ideas, and dreams. But it is one rooted in creation *and* destruction, dark *and* light, vast enough to hold it all, in which we are able to make use of everything here as a way to penetrate the miracle, to see beyond the veil, and connect more deeply with others, helping them (and ourselves) in ever more creative ways. We enter into the miracle by fully *participating* in life, not only in those known, safe, and secure feelings and experiences but in the entire spectrum, where we might discover an unknown bounty that awaits us. From this perspective, our "life's purpose" is to *live*, fully, and honor the rare opportunity we have been given to have a heart that is sometimes broken and sometimes whole.

## A RADICAL APPROACH TO SUFFERING

To see our pain, confusion, and struggle as an intelligent communication from the deepest parts of ourselves is a radical approach, to be sure. To suffer *consciously* is an ancient, sacred art lost in our time, replaced by a well-intentioned, solar self-help industry designed to take us out of the darkness and complexity and into consistent joy, flow, happiness, and bliss. There is nothing wrong, of course, with any of these positive states! Let us rejoice and give thanks when they arrive, but not at the expense of fragmentation, self-abandonment, and the psychic exhaustion of an unending search for improvement. Before we deem other, darker experiences invalid or see them as obstacles to a purposeful and fulfilling life, let us slow down, open, and see. When we experience suffering consciously, it reveals something we might not have expected. The meaning found within conscious suffering continues to be whispered to us by hidden alchemists, yogis, poets,

artists, parents, and ordinary women and men if we will but listen to the thundering silence. For in abandonment of the silvery, moon-like essence of the darker shades of the spectrum, we lose touch with vitality, wisdom, and soul.

For some reason, we were given a heart that is whole, and no matter how seductive it can be at times, we will never be satisfied resigning ourselves to that which is partial, even if it does feel a bit more safe and secure. Perhaps this wired-in longing for the full spectrum is a blessing *and* a curse, for at times it can feel overwhelming because the burning can and will incinerate everything that is less than illuminated within us. This incineration is another vital process we can learn about from the alchemists, for like the *solutio*, the *calcinatio* burns and transmutes the raw material into a fine, white powder, into the ashes of new life.<sup>4</sup> We will never feel fully alive through embracing only those feelings, images, dreams, and parts of ourselves that our families, societies, and authorities claim are worthy and valid, but only through the courage required to embrace the entire display, to befriend it all, and to transform the raw material of our lives into the luminous expression of wisdom and love in all its forms.

Together, may we partake of the entirety of the range of this human experience, with as much curiosity, soul, and kindness as we can discover. And may we give ourselves permission to care, to take a risk in allowing one another to matter, and to tend to the heart as it inevitably breaks in response to a bittersweet world—not to *mend* the heart, necessarily, for we are not sure if this is what it truly wants. We must discover the heart's deepest longing and whether it needs repair, even during times when it has been shattered. Or maybe it is crying out for something a bit more magical, more creative, more alive. Maybe at times we need to crumble to the ground at the magnificence of it all, awestruck at the bounty laid out before us. To fall apart. To fail. To get back up. To be humbled again. To start over. To be a beginner. An amateur at the ways of love. To make this journey with our kindred

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travelers and the sun, moon, and stars. And to realize together how little we know in the face of it all.

Thank you for sharing some of your heart and life with me as we turn toward the mystery together.

*MATT LICATA  
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