

Deschooling Dialogues: On Initiation, Trauma and Ritual with Francis Weller by Francis Weller, Alnoor Ladha

This is an edited transcript of a conversation that took place on November 4, 2020 as part of an interview series titled, Deschooling Dialogues. Alnoor Ladha (AL) interviews Francis Weller (FW), a psychotherapist, writer and activist who pioneered the method of soul-centered psychotherapy. He is the author of *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*; *The Threshold Between Loss and Revelation* (with Rashani Réa) and *In the Absence of the Ordinary: Essays in a Time of Uncertainty*, which is the focus of this interview. The first chapter of the book, *Rough Initiations*, is featured in *Kosmos Journal*.

AL: Hello Francis. Wonderful to be here with you. We will get into your latest book, *In the Absence of the Ordinary*, but first, can you share a bit of your background with the community?

FW: The archetypal psychology of Jung and then [James] Hillman have been my main influences on how I perceive the work of soul. We are very dominated by self-psychology right now. It's like drinking dust most of the time. What I wanted is something with a little more body to it, and that's where I found Hillman's writings and his teachings and guidance on how to work with the soul. I've been a therapist for almost 40 years, so I've developed my own approach to working with people, which I call soul-centered psychotherapy.

Along the way, I began to see the soul is here for the community. It's not so much an interior project. There's a saying that 'the greater part of the soul lies outside the body'. If that's true, then I'm actually ensouled when I'm participating. When I'm with the atmosphere, when I'm with the colors, when I'm with the trees, when I'm with my other fellow beings, that's when I'm, in a sense, most ensouled.

Then I began working around cultivating relationships to community-building. I was introduced to the work of ritual through my friendship with Malidoma Somé, the African teacher and elder. We taught together for about six years trying to find this amalgam between Indigenous traditions and the western poetic, spiritual, psychological traditions. That really spurred my desire to create ritual-based community, because that's the most archaic, that's the most ancient form of religion.

For hundreds of thousands of years, human beings worked through trauma communally through ritual practices. Ritual was the re-regulating practice after trauma or a death. What happens when we abandon those forms? Again, another thread of what the soul yearns for is dropped. I've spent the last 20-plus years developing ritual practices for community around grief, around gratitude, around initiation, around reclaiming lost parts of our being, around renewing the world.

AL: One of the things that struck me from your latest essay series, *In Absence of the Ordinary*, but especially from the chapter *Rough Initiations*, is the distinction between trauma culture and initiation culture. How do you see this playing out in the dominant culture?

FW: I was working with the people in my practice, and also the community work, and then in the cancer program at Commonweal. I began to really feel into the similarities of my initiation work with men. What these patients were going through, how similar the process was, that in any true initiatory process, there's three things that happen. First, there's a severance from the world that you once knew. Then there's a radical alteration in your sense of identity. And then there's a profound realization that you can never go back to the world that was. In true initiation, you don't want to go back to the world that was. Initiation is meant to escort you into a wider, more inclusive, participatory, sacred cosmos.

Trauma, on the other hand, has the inverse effect. The same three things happen. There's a severance from the world. There's a radical alteration of the identity and in a sense, you cannot go back to what was. But what trauma does to the psyche is it reduces it down to a singularity. I become cut off and severed from that sense of being engaged with a wider and more encompassing sense of identity. I become isolated in the cosmos. If you talk to anybody who's gone through trauma, that's the effect that it has on the body and on the psyche. You are torn out of that sense of being a part of the cosmos.

What distinguishes these two things is initiation, what I call the contained encounter with death. The containment was provided by the community, by the elders, by the ancestors, by the rituals, by the space itself. In a sense, you are initiated into a place, not into abstraction. You are actually initiated into the ground beneath your feet. Those are the five things that provided a containment field for that encounter with death, because all initiations require some kind of encounter with death.

What I call trauma is an uncontained encounter with death. There's nothing there holding you when that same precipice is approached. You are left basically naked, nothing holding you. Again, you contract back into a place of survival in that moment rather than expand out into that wider, cosmological sense of being. We don't have those containment fields in white, western culture. We still live through these encounters with death, which are inevitable. I often say initiation is not optional.

You don't get to choose whether or not you're going to be taken to these edges. You will be taken to those edges. The only thing we have to ask ourselves is what we require to make it meaningful.

And the genuine means of breakthrough happen when these containment fields are present. If they're not, we're living in an ongoing traumatic field. That's where we are right now.

AL: It seems to be very difficult for people to be critical of the culture in which they are enmeshed within. There are all sorts of mechanisms that dominant cultures use to further socialize and entrench us including patriotism, nationalism, supremacy, progress, and even the idea that you should be grateful because you would be nothing in the absence of the existing culture. How does one disentangle themselves from identifying with the all-pervasive dominant culture? How do we get to the boundary-dissolving states that

allow us to see the true effects of culture? How have you done this personally?

FW: These are really pertinent, essential questions for us right now. How do I want to approach this? For me, I guess it happened primarily through suffering. I had this profound feeling of emptiness in my being, and this emptiness was personalized, as if it was some character flaw, some defect in my own being. As I sat with many other people in my practice, that thread of emptiness came up over and over and over again, to the point where I had to begin to question whether it was my own personal flaw or whether it was a wider systemic issue.

Then simultaneously, through studying traditional cultures and Indigenous cultures, I began to look at how they raised people, the value of belonging, the central sense of your necessity, that you were needed, that you were valued, the value of ancestors, the value of ritual. All these practices kept a cohesiveness so that the psyche didn't go into that place of feeling empty. Where this emptiness comes from is our hyper-focus on individualism, which began several hundred years ago at least with the Enlightenment.

Initiation, Human and Solar

We can go back even further to the disruption of tribal culture in general. If we go back deep enough into our lineages, we all come from intact tribal cultures. The Roman invasions of Europe and various other drivers began to dislodge these things and we began to become adaptive to the dominant culture, but the real rupture, I think, came in the 16th and 17th centuries when the emphasis began to move from a sense of village-mindedness to the individual. That reached its zenith now here in white western culture in America, I think, where we have abandoned primarily all sense of identity beyond my own interiority. We are separate. We may exist, but there's nothing that really binds us together in this ideology. This ideology of individualism breeds this feeling of emptiness.

AL: Please say more.

FW: What we do with emptiness are all the isms you just mentioned. Patriotism, nationalism, capitalism, racism. All these isms are attempts to stuff the emptiness with something, because the emptiness is intolerable. We cannot endure emptiness, so we fix it. We also neglect what I call primary satisfactions, which are the satisfactions that evolved over our long evolutionary process of friendship and ritual and singing together, sharing meals, being under the stars together, hearing the stories around the fire at night, gathering wood, grieving together, celebrating together. Those are the primary satisfactions, and almost none of those exist any more.

We then lean into our secondary satisfactions. Power, strength, wealth, privilege, hierarchy, rank, etc. On a more personal level, addictions of all sorts are attempts to stuff something into that hole at the core of our lives, because it's intolerable. As you know, as an addict, you can never get enough of what you don't need.

You keep filling the hole with more cocaine or more power or more money. The billionaires keep saying, "I don't have enough." In the Native American tradition, they call it wetiko, a cannibalistic disease where you can never consume enough. You're always hungry, always wanting more.

I think that's partly where this is all coming from, the abandonment of the primary

satisfactions, the abandonment of village life, the abandonment of a sense of identity that goes beyond the individual.

AL: Indeed. In Sufism, we talk about the universal identity as the primary identity, and our individual identities as secondary identity. But in western culture it's topsy-turvy, as most things are. Everywhere you go, we have the reification of that individual identity from your career as personality signifier to the machinery of bureaucracy (e.g. passports, social security numbers) to the "preference porn" of social media, where your personal preferences are synonymous with your small 'I' identity.

So within the context of late-stage capitalism, where every aspect of our lives is mediated by capital, from where we live, what we do for a living, how we interact with other human beings, our self-worth, etc. how do we co-create and reclaim intact cultures outside of the dominant paradigm? How do we cultivate an ethic of inter-being?

FW: When I began my work, particularly, when I first began talking about grief, it was hard to convince people to even come to a lecture, let alone come to a weekend where we were going to be working with grief. Over the years, I think the denial systems have begun to crack. The denial is cracking. The façade of what capitalism can provide for us is collapsing. That's part of the hidden benefit of COVID.

I have faith that, on small-scale encounters, whenever we hold a grief ritual, invariably there are people there who have never done anything like this at all, but they know they need to be inside of a holding space to process their grief. Invariably, somebody will say at the end of it, "I've never done anything like this at all, but it felt oddly familiar." What is that familiarity? That's our deep time inheritance. This is how we always did it. My faith is in that memory. My faith is that we're not trying to reinvent something. We're trying to remember something, and when you're in states that we're in like right now, that's what we can call upon. People are coming more and more and more to that recognition that the secondary satisfactions of wealth and power and prestige are bankrupt. As one of my mentors said, "Yeah, you climbed the ladder of success and you only find that it's leaning against the wrong building." There's nothing up there. It's an empty promise.

When we're in ritual space together, singing together, sharing poetry, grieving together, giving thanks, we're not wondering where the next iPhone is going to come from or where the next TV set is going to come from or when can I get my new car? We are inside of primary satisfactions, and the soul is content.

Can we get there? We have to. The only thing that's ever been sustainable as a human species are small-scale, localized cultures. We don't have culture right now. We have a loose-based society. We have agreements societally, like stop at a red light and go at a green light. We have loose societal agreements, but we don't have culture, so we have to return back to what culture really promotes, which is art, imagination, conviviality, mutual entanglement. That's what true culture is built on.

Tree of Time by Sveta Dorosheva

AL: Yes, the future lies in the remembering, in the acknowledgement of the endowment of our deep time ancestry. At the same time, I feel the bifurcation as well, the extreme polarities of light and dark. The remembering is getting quickened and so is the psychosis; the wetiko fever is getting hotter. There's no neat, tidy narrative to it. It feels like two wings of a bird going in opposite directions. Perhaps the apparent catastrophe is

the rebirth?

FW: That would be my prayer. We are entering the long dark. I use that term not negatively at all. I use it alchemically, that certain things can only happen in darkness. We are in a time of decay, a time of collapse, a time of endings, a time of sheddings. These are necessary.

We are seeing this last gasp effort to try to uphold the old structures. Keep capitalism going. Keep the stock market inflated. They're all going to collapse. They have to, because the system, as you know from your work, is unsustainable. Not only in terms of world resources, but just in terms of human capacity to endure that kind of emptiness.

The collapse is happening. I think what we have to do right now is ask ourselves and each other how do we become skillful in navigating our walk in the dark? How do we cultivate imagination? How do we cultivate collaboration? How do we cultivate fields of reciprocity with the Earth, within human and more-than-human communities, so that we're not extracting more than what can be replenished? How do we cultivate the spiritual values of restraint and mutuality?

As far as what we're going through right now, we're watching the historic trauma unfold, and the reactions to trauma, which are panic, terror, exaggerated expressions of masculinity in its grossest form. And we're also seeing a heightened and quickened sense of compassion. People are beginning to look beyond these dualities and whether that's gender issues or race issues. They're beginning to see what is non-binary. What does the third way look like? What does the imagination take us into when we stop seeing it as an either/or situation? We're seeing the ancestors of Nazis sitting down with the ancestors of the Holocaust survivors finding common ground. We're finding the ancestors of slave-owners and the ancestors of the slaves finding common ground. That's momentous. That's hopeful. That binary system is beginning to create a third, a new imagining of how our mutual lives are so entangled, therefore our healing is entangled.

We have to give up the idea of private salvation and the idea of private healing. That's all fantasy. We either heal communally or we don't.

How we get through this whitewater over the next months or years? I don't know. That's going to take a lot of internal fortitude. I was doing a series last month, and one of the things we were talking about was the transgenerational transmission of trauma, but I said, "We also are the inheritors of the transgenerational transmission of courage, of resilience, of love, of wisdom. Can we call on that as well?"

The work right now is to become immense. We have to get our arms around immense things. Violence and hatred and bigotry and racism. And also around love and compassion and devotion and a certain fidelity to protect what is alive. We have to become immense. This is not a time to become small.

I have no idea if I responded to your question at all.

AL: Linearity is overrated. You answered on many levels.

I'm going to read you a line from your own writing, which may be awkward, but for the sake of the context for the next question which is on mythology. In *Rough Initiations*, you

say, “Many of the great myths begin in a time such as this. The land has become barren, the king corrupted, the ways of peace lost. It is in these conditions that a ripeness arises for radical change. It is a call to courage and humility. Every one of us will be affected by the changes wrought by this difficult visitation.” Can you talk about the mythological nature of this moment.

FW: We always think our times are unique. Obviously, it has a quality of uniqueness now because of the scale of potential collapses, not just economic, but also planetary, living systems collapse. The scale might be more exaggerated than what you're familiar with, but human beings have gone through these epics before. The myths tell us something very important, that we can find our way through, that there are wisdom teachings in all traditions that can inform us, that can give us some sense of what we need to do in order to enact gestures of courage or gestures of reconciliation or gestures of healing. What do we do?

The myths that tell us that we can't over extract from the Earth. For example, the Greek myth of Erysichthon. He was a king who had great contempt for the gods and goddesses, and a great deal of self-importance. He wanted to build a banquet hall to his own radiance. He sent his soldiers out to the woods to chop down the trees. It happened to be Demeter's sacred woods, and the soldiers were very reluctant when he commanded them to cut. Every tree that they cut into bled. At the very heart of the woods was Demeter's tree itself, and on this tree were hung all these mementos from people who received healing and prayers answered from Demeter.

Sveta Dorosheva | “The Alchemyst”, illustration from “The Awakening of the Sleepless” (in Russian) by Dmitry Deitch

No one would touch the tree. So then Erysichthon decided to cut it down himself. Demeter cursed him with endless, unsatisfying hunger. He could never be satisfied. He began eating everything in the kingdom. He sold his daughter [Mestra] into slavery to get money to buy more food, and then one day, while he was eating, he bit his finger, and the taste of his own blood consumed him, and he consumed his own body.

AL: This is the story of the west. This is where the concept of wetiko meets the Enlightenment.

FW: Yes, this is the story we are in right now. Hopefully, these wisdom stories give us some pause to say, “We have to regard the sacred.” When we lose regard for the sacred, we will consume everything. Isn't that what we've done? We've turned everything into an object. This is a resource rather than a living system, those sacred groves. A part of our call right now is to re-sacralize, to reimagine the presence of the sacred. The deeper we go into physics, the deeper we go into biology, the deeper we go into psychology, we find at their shared root, mystery. Absolute, enduring mystery. That's the closest I can get to what I would call the holy, to the sacred.

AL: How do we get back to the sacred grove? What do we need to unlearn both at a cultural level and an individual level, to not eat ourselves?

FW: What we need to unlearn, from my perspective, is our reification of self, because self is a bounded, encapsulated identity. It cuts me off from you. It cuts me off from the trees. It cuts me off from the turtles and the sky and the moon. What we need to remember, to re-enter, to reanimate is that we are living embodiments of soul life, and

soul, like I say, is incredibly entangled with everything around us. Only if we could unlearn the separation through identity....

And I have to confess how much my profession reifies the separate self every day as the epitome of what we're supposed to be. That saddens me greatly, that there's no psyche in psychology any more. There's self. It's selfology now rather than psychology.

If we could unlearn this artificial encapsulation and the empty self and come back into that robust embrace of the soul, what I call our composite identity, then we would remember our wild entanglement with everything. Then I wouldn't feel like I'm just in self-preservation, but I would be helping to preserve the living fabric of all things. That would be a holy obligation.

AL: That's a beautiful articulation of the meaning that has been lost when you're in a context that doesn't hold up that sacred obligation as the highest act of devotion. Not as an externally imposed duty, but rather, as the reciprocal responsibility we have for the endowments we have been entrusted with. It reminds me of a Sufi proverb attributed to the Great Mother. She says to her children, "You are entrusted with everything and entitled to nothing."

FW: Right. I recently wrote something very similar. "The process (initiation) yielded someone more attuned to responsibilities than rights, more aware of multiple entanglements than entitlements."

AL: That's a perfect way to end this conversation. It's an honor to be entangled with you.