

An Apprenticeship with Sorrow

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When COVID-19 joined the long list of climacterics we'd been enduring—hurricanes, fires, tornadoes, floods, and unprecedented housing and employment shortages—I felt an urgency to understand the overwhelming grief, loss, and uncertainty I was experiencing. The first person I called was my mentor and colleague, Francis Weller, MA, the author of *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief* as well as *The Threshold Between Loss and Revelation* (with Rashani Réa) and *In the Absence of the Ordinary: Essays in a Time of Uncertainty*. In his work, Francis considers the kinds of environmental, political, and cultural events we are wrestling with right now through the lens of the ancient wisdoms which he has studied over the decades of his career. We met in May 2020 on Zoom.

LS: Francis, I know that you, yourself, have experienced tremendous upheaval over the past two or three years—the fires in Northern California, year after year, and now the COVID crisis. How do you think about this new crisis, the pandemic, within the context of these previous disasters?

FW: The COVID pandemic is an example of what I call a *rough initiation*; an “uncontained encounter with death.” Like other traumatic events, COVID has thrown us into a time of radical uncertainty. Unlike the deliberately ordained processes of *traditional initiations*, which I call a “contained encounter with death,” we're still asked to encounter the same fierce edge of life and death, but without the elements that hold the initiate within a cultural lineage. Traditional initiations have always been guided by elders, following established rituals, rooted in community, with a deep grounding in both the natural world and in the sacred. The process breaks the initiate's identity open to the widest possible aperture of affiliation; I become identified with that wider surround, a watershed, the cosmos. But trauma shatters this sense of identity, down to a singularity. *I am all alone in the cosmos, I feel isolated.* This is the rough initiation.

So what we have to do—and I think that's part of the deep work of this time—is to ask ourselves, can we reimagine this time of breakdown into our singularities as nesting into something soulful, where we can hopefully emerge with some expanded sense of an identity that links us? Our identities, which have been highly conditioned around individualism, are being shaken. It's not *my* COVID crisis. It's not *my* personal wounds that I'm sitting with and digesting; it's ours. So the potential to shift into another, more inclusive sense of self is before us. But we have to utilize it and not just get through this. We don't want to just endure it.

LS: It seems so important to utilize this experience. Removed from our familiar lives, we are all involved in this rough initiation—regardless of geography, age, race, religion, socioeconomics. How do we not just endure this?

FW: I like talking about moving from endurance to depth: how do we not just grit our teeth and hope to not get killed, but instead, how do we really enter this place as mythic? The ground itself becomes mythic, sacred ground, asking the utmost from each of us, to think like a village, basically. I put my mask on, not so much for my own health, but for the health of the village. I'm being taught to think in a more inclusive mindset right now.

LS: I'd like to consider for a moment what that looks like. We're seeing people in hospitals; some on ventilators, at the end stage of their lives in this battle with COVID, completely isolated; they actually die alone, without family and loved ones by their side. I wonder what you think of this?

FW: This speaks to the fact that as a culture, we have done nothing to associate our death with being inevitably attached to community. We have this fantasy of immortality, that we're immune from ravages and tragedies, and from dying alone. And we have ill-prepared our people for the inevitables that are coming. If we were a mature culture facing this, we would recognize this moment as an opportunity for profound intimacy with our own souls.

LS: That's interesting—you say *if we were a mature culture . . .*

FW: Yes. I consider mature cultures to be those that have somehow navigated the whitewater of their own suicidal tendencies and emerged with the sustaining values of gratitude, reciprocity, mutuality, and restraint—one of our least-developed spiritual values. A mature culture recognizes their embeddedness in place; their relationship to the land, to the water, to the animals, to everything that surrounds them. An immature culture is very adolescent in its practices: it's all about me; what can I get for myself? If we were a mature culture, we'd have reciprocity—around death, dying, grief—putting something back into the body of the Earth. That's a lot of what ritual is about; restoration, replenishment.

LS: And so the hospitalized COVID patient—alone and dying—faces what you call *an opportunity for a deeper intimacy with their own soul*. How do we, as a culture, develop that capacity, to provide the opportunity for something like that to happen?

FW: Imagine dying alone in the hospital; you're consumed with fear and dread. You *become* fear and dread. Whereas, standing in the mature process, we would say, *I'm in the presence of fear and dread. How do I hold that? How do I become a compassionate vessel for the experiences of fear and dread?* And I'm not talking lightly here, this is fierce, fierce practice. I can barely imagine myself being in that bed in a hospital right now, and having no one touch me, no one come near me other than behind masks and gloves. And I'm being asked to basically exit this world, to disappear on my own accord. That's an intense spiritual moment. And unfortunately, for most of us, it won't be a spiritual moment; it will be a moment of panic and terror.

LS: What does it require in oneself to be able to form a relationship with that kind of event?

FW: Well, you first have to have some invitation to recognize that there is something to be in relationship with. Our psychology in Western culture doesn't teach us this. It basically says, *You are what you're experiencing*. Carl Jung said we can't heal what we can't separate from. That's the same thing alchemy teaches: you have to have separation. That's an essential psychological skill, to be able separate from what I'm experiencing.

LS: And that would be the invitation, then—something emotionally overcomes you—maybe shocking, distressing, upsetting?

FW: Yes. And the moment you can turn and face it, you're separate from it. Not distanced, but separate, distinct from what you are witnessing. That allows for a movement of kindness or caring or compassion, and a move toward the experience of suffering. Compassion teaches us how to suffer with. Not just to suffer, but to suffer *with*, even for ourselves. How do I suffer *with* my own self? How do I be with my own suffering—that is an important part of the maturation I've been speaking about.

LS: Is there something about the COVID-19 pandemic that gives us some hint of direction for this? Clearly, an invitation has been issued. But how do we pick it up and begin to *suffer with*? I think that's one of the elements that I have been searching for, for many years: how do we suffer along with one another? It's certainly what your work has been about. But it's almost ironic that as we are asked to distance ourselves from others, what you're calling for is the need to be able to suffer *with*.

FW: Frequently, when we get sick or we feel weakened, we feel shame; *I did something wrong*, or, *I'm not good enough*; or, *I'm being punished*. COVID has made suffering more ubiquitous. And maybe in that sense of communality, am I going to judge other

people for getting sick? No. I have a lot of compassion for all the people who are sick with this, who have died from this. I might be one of them at some point. I'm not taking it personally, or digesting it through my own personal psychology. Psyche is much larger than me—this is clearly a psychic phenomenon; it's affecting the psyches of seven billion people. This has really never happened before. The 1918 pandemic was pretty universal, but this one is affecting the vast majority of human beings on the planet; there's no way I can personalize this. And if I don't personalize it, maybe I can begin to move into a different way of being in relationship to it.

LS: So in this rough initiation, we're leaving familiar ground, and we're in a land that's completely uncertain . . .

FW: Yes.

LS: But I think we are envisioning that once this is over, we're going to return, once again, to familiar ground. A lot of us are saying, *I can't wait to go to my favorite restaurant and have my favorite meal* or *I can't wait to go to the beaches or to the parks or sit in the backyard with my friends*. But for some of us, there's some question about what will be left when this is over. I think probably, much like the wildfires that you experienced over the past three years, there may not be familiar ground to return to. So, what does it mean to go into this meeting with death, and know that we can't ever return to familiar ground?

FW: When the initiation is held by community, there are three things that happen. First there is a severance from the old world. Secondly there is a radical alteration in your sense of identity—*I am no longer who I was*. And finally, there is a profound realization that *I can never return to the world that was*. You're not supposed to return to the world that was, after initiation; you're supposed to enter a new world.

This is where Western psychology and Western medicine are, how should I say it, not very attuned to the needs of soul. They talk about *let's get you back to where you were before the crisis began*. That would be to completely waste the crisis. I don't want to waste this pandemic. I don't want to think, *Well, how do we muscle our way back to where we were?* Where we were was causing profound damage to the environment, to our watersheds, to our communities, to our children. It benefited a few and it caused suffering for the vast majority of people. Should we go back to that? God no!

LS: So what makes it so difficult for us to accept, or even embrace the experiences we're having during the COVID pandemic? I know that, for myself, after the first month of shelter-in-place, when almost all traffic had come to a halt, I was stunned by the clear air, the intense birdsong, and the wild animal sightings reported all across

the globe. Many things were really different, in very significant, wonderful ways. But once the restrictions were lifted, these all began to reverse themselves again.

FW: The fantasy of returning to what was results from our addiction to productivity, efficiency, income, wealth, power. I'm hoping that we're beginning to see through those; to see how thin their veneer is. *When productivity is taken away, what am I left with? When power structures are disappearing, what am I left with?* Hopefully, again, what we fall back into is a confrontation with our own being, with our own soul. There has to be a return, but a different kind of return. We want to return, after an initiatory event, into a community that says, *I see that you've come back different. And I see that you've come bearing something for us.* If we just simply want to get back to where we were, we've probably gathered nothing. But if we can go through the whole ordeal, and have this sense of severance occur, have our sense of identity broken open, and realize that we're not returning to the world that we once inhabited, but instead, that we're returning to a new world, then we come back bringing real medicine to the community. That's the role of initiation: initiation was never meant for me, individually. It was never about personal growth. The purpose of the initiation was to ripen me and prepare me to become of service to the greater body of life. Initiation was an act of sacrifice on behalf of the whole, not on my behalf.

Hopefully, we're seeing some signs of that in this crisis; people who are shopping for the elderly, people singing to one another, musicians out on the streets playing music. Those are all acts of service.

LS: How do we bring about this shift in thinking, moving away from the separate individual, toward the integrated whole of the community?

FW: It really helps to think mythically; to see it for what it is. We're not the first ones to suffer from circumstances beyond our control. If I can think mythically, I can see it as an initiatory event. But to think of it psychologically puts it back into me, personally, *my* personal experience. There's nothing wrong with that, but I think we need a much bigger vessel right now, to imagine what's happening to us. For me, initiation is the best way to envision it, and that requires mythological thinking.

LS: It also seems that if we look at it mythically, it shifts perspective from the individual and locates us in a much longer lineage; so that when we've relinquished the individual ground, we can lift upward, and from above, see our place in context, something like a bird's-eye view.

FW: Yes, that's the value of mythological thinking. When we get ill, or depressed, or feel worthless—whatever the wound happens to be in Western psychological

thinking—we feel damaged, defective, apart from the community. So we work to fix ourselves, to make ourselves good enough to be welcomed. That’s a very poor premise: if I’m trying to prove to you that I’m good enough to belong, huge parts of me will never show up. Mythological thinking, on the other hand, says, by necessity, *You have this, this was given to you so you could actually join with other human beings, rather than feel exceptional or different.* This actually brings you into the body of the community. Because all of us know suffering.

I think we can get anxious around the idea of the collective, as if we’re going to lose our individuality. But I think my individuality is heightened by being embedded in the collective. One of my primary teachers, James Hillman, said, “The issues are rarely about resolution, they’re about spaciousness.” Right now, we’re being asked to get our arms around hundreds of thousands of people dying, millions and millions of people being sick or out of work. How do you do that? Well, you have to become quite immense. You cannot stay contracted and small and have some kind of resonance with what’s going on in the world. It can be easy to get our arms around hope and trust and love and support: it can be harder to get our arms around fear, grief, panic, dread, death. But that’s exactly how big you have to be right now. You have to be able to encompass everything.

LS: And how do we do that now?

FW: We could imagine this time of social distancing as almost a monastic time. It can be used as a hermitage, as a time to cultivate that level of intimacy with our own soul. Rainer Maria Rilke had a phrase in one of his poems where he said “I am too alone in the world, but not alone enough to make every moment holy.” You can hear that pivot he makes in there. We all know about feeling lonely. But then he says “but not alone enough.” In other words, he hasn’t turned it into sanctuary yet. But the moment he turns it into sanctuary, every minute becomes holy.

Imagine entering these days of social distancing, this hermitage, as if you’re moving through something personified, something that had quality to it, that you could be in relationship with. There are prayers, chants, readings, reflections that you can do; again, not just for endurance, but for depth. These practices drop you into an experience, an encounter with soul, so that we actually use the time creatively, meaningfully, and not just with distraction, not just with alcohol, not just with TV, but actually seeing these times as potentially holding something of beauty, of depth.

This is part of our maturation, but not what we’re prepared for. Too often, what we’re actually encountering is our emptiness. That’s the panic that comes up when we’re asked to socially distance. We haven’t cultivated a rich interior world or rich relationship to soul, so we enter into a state of emptiness. And that’s terrifying. We don’t know how to sit with our legs dangling over the edge of that precipice. But that’s

what we have to do. That's our spiritual work, too; to become acquainted with this emptiness.

LS: Would you say that that's maybe the essential spiritual crisis of COVID, then; that we are not ready to have that intimate engagement with our depths, where we feel our emptiness?

FW: Yes, I think so . . .

LS: And that the panic drives us to distract ourselves, to become active, to drive to get back out, back to our old lives?

FW: Yes. Because we don't know how to tolerate that void and how to begin a conversation with it. And, in a sense, also how not to read it as personal failing—we can read this emptiness as somehow *my lack*. But what it is, actually, is a failure of culture to offer nourishment to that deeper part of us, to the soul, and so we end up chasing what I call *secondary satisfactions*: wealth, power, status. And if you know about addiction, you know you can never get enough of what you don't need; you want more and more and more. We can see it on the national level right now: these very wealthy people cannot get enough.

Part of our deep spiritual work right now is to navigate that emptiness, to come into some fruitful relationship with that. In the Eastern traditions, that emptiness is considered fertile ground—in it, there may be something that we can touch into, that we can cultivate, that we can write a poem from, that we could sing a song from, that we can dance to, that we can share in ritual. We need to respond to it, not just try to fill it up with secondary satisfactions. What we need are the *primary satisfactions*, which are touch, and friendship, and warmth, and starlit nights, and shared meals—a lot of these we're not getting right now.

LS: That's so true . . .

FW: But those primary satisfactions are still there. We're having one right now. Just this conversation, we're touching into soul, we're touching into the warmth of being human. That satisfies us on some deep level.

LS: Francis, what can be offered to those who are panicked at facing that emptiness which they've avoided for so long?

FW: First, I invite them to set a timer for one minute. Can they sit and do nothing? For a minute. And maybe then they can stretch that out to two minutes the next day?

And secondly, can they ask themselves, *Can I build my tolerance for sitting in the unknown, in the unformed spaces of my being? Can I begin to listen, to hear what absence is there, and not so much listen for my flaws, my failings, but to really listen for what is absent?* In that absence, we might hear that we missed the sound of owls; the sound of crickets; the laughter of children; we are missing singing together; we are missing the commons: what is really at the heart of this emptiness is an absence of the other.

LS: In this kind of estrangement from the commons, how do we enter the initiatory process?

FW: Initiation is not optional. There are four ways that psyche brings us to the possibility of change: The first one is through encounters with what I call The Predator, that which threatens our very legitimacy. The second one is through our wounds, through our suffering, through the traumas in our life. The third one is through the descent into the darkness. And the last one is love. Love, in Rilke's language, is "the great inducement to ripen." It demands of us our utmost.

But initiation is also not guaranteed. The invitation toward initiation does not mean it will be completed. For some, it will be. And those are the ones who, through their devotion to the process, take up the apprenticeship that comes with that initiation, which is an apprenticeship of sorrow, basically. In the work of soul, this apprenticeship with sorrow, this fidelity to that threshold you crossed in initiation, is the shaping of an elder.

LS: Can you say more about the role of the elder in our culture, particularly at this moment in time?

FW: The elder is shaped in the heat of staying present to the sorrows of the world—and also to the beauty, the humor, the tragedies of the world. An elder becomes immense. We are a culture that right now loves simple answers. But we don't have the tolerance for living into the uncertainty, the ambiguity, the complexity, the multiplicity. That's what an elder can bring, particularly when working with young people. They're not coming in with the answers. They're coming in with *I can sit with that not knowing*.

LS: Perhaps the elder, then, provides the container to hold the hot, molten substance of this culture as we try to get our arms around what is happening to us? What do we need to know, so that we can come through this initiatory time more successfully?

FW: We might need to know how to lean more on the eternal, rather than on the familiar. To be able to see that, I think, is part of what an elder can bring: not so much grasping for answers or solutions, but learning to live in that uncertainty. I think that's part of what COVID is doing right now—tearing the mask off of our fantasies of predictability. All the plans we had—from baseball games to dinner invitations to walking up the street and seeing somebody and giving them a hug—all those familiar things are gone now.

Superficial response limits our capacity for what we can hold. But when we sit and allow grief to carve out riverbeds in our soul, really feel that deepening—we are made larger and more encompassing by that long apprenticeship with sorrow. We're being asked to really learn to sit with sorrow, if we are willing to even tolerate that guest in the house. Every trauma, every crisis like this, carries tremendous grief with it. Are we willing to sit with that and let it deepen us and, in a sense, create a deeper bottom in us, so we can hold more?

COVID exposes that grief is all around us, all the time. In our very daylit world, we can almost pretend that grief isn't always there. But it is. And I think also what COVID is doing is preparing the ground for the coming waves of dislocation and suffering that will come with climate crisis and economic collapse and cultural decay. This might be just the warm-up band. If we can use this, it might help to prepare us for harder waves that are going to be coming ashore.

LS: What I've learned from you, Francis, is that my grief is most tolerable when held within community. But, as you've said here, many of us are unfamiliar with grief and the process of grieving. What language do we use in a culture that is disengaged and fragmented and immature in its ability to tolerate this kind of suffering and sorrow?

FW: There are individual rituals you, yourself, can do around grief, because, in a sense, you're never alone. You can go out and sit on the grass and cry with the Earth. You can hold a stone and speak your stories into that stone, or you can tell your stories to a tree. This idea of being alone is really Western fiction. We're rarely alone. We're constantly in conversation. We *just think* privately. And that's also part of why it's so hard to grieve: I make it private—that's *my* grief; I have to grieve alone. Part of the power of gathering in community, even online, is to begin to remember, to notice, *I'm just part of the communal cup of grief*. It's not just mine; I hear your story, I can relate to it, and you can relate to my grief. It might not be the same, but you can understand that I am sad, brokenhearted about it. You can relate to that. And in that way, we are no longer alone. •.