

## ***A Conversation with Jennifer Welwood***

### **Embodying Our Awake Nature**

*For many years Lee made an annual trip to the Bay Area. Accompanying him was always a rich and multi-faceted experience, as he conducted the business of his Sacred Bazaar, gave public talks, and visited friends from diverse traditions of practice on the path. Over the years, Lee had become passionately interested in the work of John Welwood, a renowned psychologist and Tibetan Buddhist disciple of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. John had coined the term “spiritual bypass,” in which he pioneered insight into a necessary intersection of contemporary spiritual and psychological awareness. During my years of San Francisco sojourns with Lee, I watched as a deep friendship ignited between John and Lee, giving us the opportunity to get to know his extraordinary wife, Jennifer Welwood, as well. In afternoon meetings at a favorite European café that specialized in Italian and French pastries, coffee and tea, we gathered around a long table, well-fueled by coffee and sweets, and dove into powerful, juicy, and sometimes provocative conversations with these two friends—both of them long-time veterans of the spiritual path.*

*I remember being intrigued by the pithy stories Jennifer shared of her many adventures and depth work with teachers and gurus in both Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist traditions. As a psychotherapist and spiritual teacher who synthesizes traditional practice with the wise use of psychotherapeutic principles, her perspectives on the transformational process were affirming and inspiring. In December 2020, at the end of a long year of global pandemic, I was glad to reconnect with Jennifer via an invitation to an interview for Sahaja. Jennifer graciously accepted, and in April 2021, we met on Zoom. What follows is the edited transcript of our lively and intimate conversation, enthusiastically joined by Nachama Greenwald and Clelia Lewis.*

Mary Angelon Young

**MAY:** Could you tell us about your work and how the synthesis of spiritual and psychological is important as a viable spiritual path today?

**Jennifer Welwood:** It all emerged out of my direct experiences as a young person embarking on the spiritual path. During the years between my mid-teens and late twenties, I experienced a number of spiritual teachers, students, and communities, and kept finding that even those who seemed to have genuine spiritual development—and in some cases, profound realization—were not automatically freed from tendencies that did not seem congruent with being awake, and that were sometimes acted out in ways that were extremely harmful.

In trying to resolve this contradiction, I initially related with it in a binary, either/or way: Either my perception of genuine spiritual illumination was flawed, or my perception of harmful tendencies and behaviors was flawed. I grappled with these two mutually exclusive propositions for years, along with the traditional doctrine that any perception of human flaws or limitations in a teacher could only reflect a lack of “surrender” on the part of the student—the failure of a lesser being to comprehend the enlightened activity of an unfathomable mind. Eventually this struggle gave way to a dawning realization that what

we could call the ascending journey of spiritual realization does not automatically accomplish what we could call the descending journey of fully integrating and embodying that realization, and that each of these trajectories must be addressed on its own terms, with its own understandings and methods.

This was when I left medical school and decided to become a psychotherapist instead, with a vision of integrating Eastern spirituality and Western psychology in the service of not only realizing but embodying our awake nature. And then a close friend told me about a guy named John Welwood, insisting that I attend his upcoming seminar because “you talk the way he writes.” Things unfolded rapidly from there, both in an immediate recognition between John and me, and a direct knowing of my dharma in this life.

In many of the Eastern traditions in their original form, human incarnation was not seen as intrinsically sacred, but rather as an error—if you were born at all, it was because you had failed to awaken in a previous life. And the only purpose of human incarnation was to serve as a platform for liberation, for escaping the cycle of birth and death and dissolving out of manifest reality altogether.

In contrast, other traditions, including some of our Western traditions, regard the human form as intrinsically sacred, as representing the sacred possibility of manifesting our awake nature, our primordial nature, in a living being, in this very life and this very world. From this perspective, spiritual awakening is not so much a transcendence of our humanity as the *fulfillment* of our humanity, where the human being becomes a bridge between heaven and earth, between the unmanifest and the manifest, between absolute reality and relative reality—“On earth as it is in heaven,” or, in the language of the alchemists, “As above, so below.”

When contextualized in this way, the work of directly relating with unresolved, unintegrated psychological material that impedes our capacity to embody our awake nature becomes part of the larger work, the alchemical work, of joining heaven and earth, which involves “waking down” as well as waking up. And then the distinction between spiritual and psychological work begins to dissolve, because psychological methods are used in the service of spiritual transformation.

**MAY:** How does that play out in your work with students? Are there specific practices in each domain, or is it all interwoven?

**JW:** It is both at different times. Sometimes we work in a very distinct way with teachings and methods that further the ascending journey of realization, and sometimes we work in a very distinct way with teachings and methods that more directly address the descending journey of transformation, integration, and embodiment. But there’s a point where all of those distinctions break down, and everything we do in the service of loosening our psychological fixations, our karmic habits, opens us to greater spiritual realization, and everything we do in the service of opening to greater spiritual realization helps loosen our psychological fixations. And then all of our endeavors along the path become part of one cohesive journey of integrated awakening.

**MAY:** Do you see this as a movement that is occurring in spirituality in the West in general? I don’t know of anyone right now in the States, but who comes to mind is Dr. Thomas Hübl, who is European. Do you know of other schools where this synthesis is active?

**JW:** I don't have extensive knowledge of the particulars of other schools or teachers, but my sense is that there are many of us who are recognizing this as the synthesis that is needed at this time, in order to address the true evolutionary needs and imperatives of humanity.

**MAY:** It seems that the work you and John pioneered with "spiritual bypassing" intuited many of the problems arising in the West between gurus and students, specifically in terms of the abuse of spiritual authority and spiritual trauma. We have friends who have had terrible experiences with their spiritual teachers and gurus, who have had to go through a long process of healing and recovering. In your experience, is spiritual bypassing unavoidable in the guru-devotee or teacher-disciple relationship? Is it something that we have to pass through, and, if we are lucky, we get through the whole transference labyrinth and then claim the path for ourselves?

**JW:** I see this as an unfolding situation we are just beginning to find our way through, where some of the old forms have outlived their usefulness, yet the new forms have not fully emerged. So we are in that beautiful, creative, in-between phase where the old is dying and the new has not yet been fully born, which means not only tolerating but appreciating this existential uncertainty, which is also full of possibility.

One of the more problematic traditional doctrines is the one requiring students to see the guru as some kind of infallible manifestation of absolute spiritual attainment and perfection, which then further requires their unquestioned "obedience" and "surrender" to everything the guru says or does. To me such a view is harmful as well as untrue, in that it requires an ongoing denial of reality and keeps the student in the position of a child, where healthy adult capacities such as clear discernment, critical thinking, and access to inner guidance remain undeveloped. In some traditions such capacities are even seen as transgressive, and realistically perceiving the limitations of a spiritual authority, whether the pope in Catholicism or the guru in Vajrayana, is regarded as a heresy, with potentially dire consequences, rather than as healthy adult functioning.

It is completely possible, and infinitely more trustworthy, to have a mature and realistic level of deep respect for one's teacher, even deep devotion, without denying the teacher's humanness, or rationalizing that humanness as enlightened activity. And this matters, because the work of "waking down" is also the work of growing up, of developing healthy adult capacities as a basis for embodying our awake nature. And if we are to have any chance of finding our way through our accruing collective predicaments, we need human beings who are not only more awake but more grown up, who are operating as psychologically mature adults. Teachers and traditions that require students to remain at the level of obedient children, in thrall to infallible purveyors of immutable doctrine, obstruct both.

This also brings in the distinction between the living essence of a tradition and the concretized doctrine of a tradition. The living essence originally arises in a form meant to benefit living beings in the time and place in which it arose. But when that living essence becomes concretized into immutable doctrine, then at some point the tradition can become more dedicated to perpetuating itself than to meeting the current needs of living beings. So we need to understand the difference between essence and doctrine, essence and form, because sometimes you need to revise or destroy the form in order to recover the essence.

So there are the problems of traditional doctrine and there are the problems of teachers who identify with that doctrine, and view themselves as some kind of finished product of ultimate enlightenment and therefore no longer on a human journey, which is always an evolutionary process. And an evolutionary process always involves trial and error, and learning and growing through trial and error. But we cannot learn and grow through trial and error if we deny the possibility of error.

Instead we need to recognize the dialectic that is always at play for a human being on a journey of embodied awakening: Our divine nature is limitless, our human nature is limited; our divine nature is perfect, our human nature is imperfect; our divine nature is indestructible, our human nature is vulnerable; our divine nature is infallible, our human nature is fallible. And not only must we recognize this dialectic—consciously, directly, and honestly—we must also learn how to transform its friction into alchemical heat, where the obstacles to fully realizing and embodying our awake nature become fuel for our further realization and embodiment. Our human limitations are there anyway, but if we don't acknowledge them they fall into the shadow, where they become increasingly divorced from awareness and increasingly harmful. This requires all of us, whether students or teachers or both, to embrace the understanding that if you are in a human body, you are on an evolutionary journey, regardless of your level of realization. *Always. Always.*

When spiritual teachers regard themselves as beyond limitation, those denied limitations can even become demonic in their harmfulness, and we have seen tragic instances of this. So the problem of traditional doctrine becomes the problem of teachers who have become legends in their own minds because the doctrine proclaims them as such. And then there is the problem of the students.

In my decades as a psychotherapist, I have worked with refugees from the whole spectrum of spiritual teachers and groups, and have found that those who tend to be drawn to and remain with teachers who are highly authoritarian, exerting high levels of control over their students' lives, are not necessarily motivated by a simple aspiration toward awakening. Instead there can be a complex weave of motivations arising from different levels of development, including a drive for existential safety, security, and certainty through group identity and affiliation, or a drive for self-esteem through some kind of status or specialness in the group hierarchy. While there is nothing inherently wrong with such drives, they belong to an earlier, conventional stage of development, and run counter to the aspiration toward awakening, which arises from a later, post-conventional stage of development. So we could say that when students are seeking the false refuge of safety, security, or self-esteem through group identity and belonging, whether consciously or unconsciously, they become susceptible to false teachers.

In my work with such students, I would first help them acknowledge their own experience with abusive teachers, and work through its multiple impacts. This often included intense guilt and fear of being consigned to various hell realms, just for daring to trust their own perceptions. But then at some point, for those with sufficient maturity and readiness, we would also explore the tendencies that made them susceptible to such teachers and groups to begin with, and reluctant to part ways even when the distortions were obvious. This became a crucial aspect of reclaiming their genuine aspiration for awakening, and sorting that out from other, more primitive drives. So as with any relational system, the limitations of the students work hand in glove with the limitations of the teachers, and the limitations of the teachers work hand in glove with the limitations of

traditional doctrine. We need to shine a light on the whole thing, with all of its converging streams of causality, so that we can all grow beyond it.

**MAY:** As our collective awareness grows in terms of the teacher archetype, the guru archetype, and how that is changing, I've thought a lot about it in terms of my own teacher, Lee. It was my experience that he had such a beautiful forward movement and vision towards something completely new and radical. Some of that spirit comes from his guru, Yogi Ramsuratkumar, a highly educated teacher who became a beggar when he was catapulted into a state of divine madness. He was just an off-the-charts, off-the-map individual. But it also comes from the Baul side of our path, because Bauls are iconoclastic heretics who turn away from dogmatic ritual and practice, which is controlled by priests and caste hierarchies.

**JW:** I didn't know the Bauls were heretics.

**MAY:** They are heretics and, in fact, revolutionaries. To be Baul one would have to renounce their caste status, Brahmin thread, everything. At the core of Baul teaching is a deep commitment to and resting in the true nature of the human being and in the potential within every human. They often refer to this as *sahaja*, this innate nature that is primordial, natural, spontaneous.

As radical as Lee was in many ways, he also had a foot in the old Piscean Age paradigm of the patriarchal perspective. He used to say, "I'm a very traditional guru," and he could be very patriarchal at times. He was certainly hierarchical. Then, on the other hand, he could be extremely open and feminine in a vast and beautiful way, like in moments on stage, when he performed in one of his rock bands. It definitely showed up in his lyrics and music. It showed up in his kindness and love toward his students and friends, as well as in places like on the Metro in Paris, for example. I remember being, literally, under the ground somewhere on the Metro, standing beside Lee, and meeting his gaze in a deep moment of transmission, a communication of pure presence in this vast, no-concept reality. So he had a foot in both worlds, the old and the new or what we're living into.

As time goes on and many gurus have crashed, fallen from grace, I've been contemplating how archetypes—like the archetype of the teacher or guru—have shadow and self expressions, both moving toward wholeness, awakened awareness and evolution even when they are expressed in ways that involve a lot of suffering. The archetype will never "go away" but can become more lucid and transparent and life affirming in its expression through the evolution of our relationship with it, our image of it, our experience of it. In that process, how the teacher or guru manifests in the living stream of the path on this Earth is changing and will have to change.

**JW:** What you describe about Lee, as having one foot in both worlds, seems like a perfect metaphor for this evolutionary process we are in, where adherence to the old patriarchal paradigm of absolute obedience to an absolute authority is no longer viable, but what we are evolving into hasn't fully revealed or consolidated itself.

At the archetypal level, though, any archetype can have both a genuine and a distorted expression, and we don't want to go to the extreme of negating the genuine expression to avoid the distorted expression. Jung addressed this when he said we should

never regard the shadow of an archetype as more significant than the body of light that casts it. So this becomes part of the evolutionary question we are living into: What are the genuine, healthy, appropriate forms of spiritual authority in present time? And what are the forms that are no longer useful, or even harmful?

I balance these considerations in my own teaching by clearly defining both the extent and limits of my authority. Our formal sangha agreements state that I am 100% in charge of the teaching contexts I offer, such as the larger retreats and the smaller group meetings, and that is **all** I am in charge of. Students are 100% in charge of their lives, including their choice to study closely with me. This kind of agreement can help guard against the harmful forms of spiritual authority without erasing its appropriate forms.

Along with this, I hold interpersonal transparency as a value in all my relationships, including the teacher/student relationship. I only teach what I know, and have confidence in that, but I am also a human being on an evolutionary journey, and when it seems useful and appropriate I share my experiences and discoveries at that level. I have never found that being vulnerable and transparent around our humanness in any way diminishes genuine spiritual authority, but rather enhances it, making it accessible and trustworthy. And this is what I think we need to aim for—where both teachers and students are mature enough to acknowledge the inevitable humanness of teachers, and include it as part of the path, without devaluing or diminishing what such a relationship can offer.

I also do not experience devotion as a one-way stream, flowing from student to teacher, but as multi-directional. I am completely devoted to the unfolding and well-being of everyone I work with, and there is deep love and respect in this, as well as appreciation for the unique beauty and genius of each person. When you know how to see the universe within every human being, you also see their genius for expressing our universal nature in a completely unique way. I enjoy this seeing, and fall in love with my students just as much as they fall in love with me. The love and devotion flow in all directions.

These are some of the ways I have found to go beyond the old paradigm while furthering a genuine journey of awakening. But at the same time—speaking of heresy—it is actually part of my heresy to be willing to embody authority, in appropriate ways and contexts. In patriarchal culture it is taboo for a woman to embody authority, and is often expressly forbidden. The *second* greatest taboo for a woman in patriarchal societies is to embody power, but the *greatest* taboo is for a woman to embody authority. So being willing to embody authority becomes an element of my heresy. What is normative for men in patriarchal culture is often heretical for women, and vice versa, and this makes the work of a dedicated heretic extremely nuanced! As part of revising the old patriarchal paradigm, we actually need *more* women who embody power and authority, but in the service of love and compassion rather than aggression or self-advancement. And women need to see other women modeling this. John was an ardent advocate of this collective evolutionary need, and always encouraged and supported my teaching.

**CL:** Jennifer, something has been coming into my awareness, regarding this evolution and changing of forms. One of these changes humanity is going through seems to be very much around sex and gender—not just breaking down the idea of patriarchy but even the idea of male and female, man and woman, and embracing that there is a whole spectrum.

I know Lee, our teacher, had a very strong sense of an objective feminine and the masculine, but also Man and Woman with capital letters. I have an instinct that there is

something genuine in that, but there's this new understanding of more fluidity, or a spectrum between these, in terms of our psychology and our humanness. I am wondering if you have any thoughts on those different domains. I guess they are in different domains, they arise in different domains. What is your sense of that fluidity and how to not lose the beauty of that dance of male and female?

**JW:** It's such a rich and interesting question. One way I relate with it is through an understanding of the subtle body, which we work with in our sangha. Cultivating the subtle body is an element of embodied awakening, and includes cultivating and balancing the solar and lunar energies, for both men and women. The central channel, the *sushumna*, does not open unless the lunar and solar energies are in balance, and then integrates and sublimates those energies as they ascend to the crown, the realm of realization, which then becomes anchored in the spiritual heart as the seat of realization on the human plane.

When you think of these energies in archetypal terms, the awakened lunar energies correlate with the mystic, the healer, and the high priest or priestess, reflecting mastery in the inner world, and the awakened solar energies correlate with the leader, the spiritual warrior, and the king or queen, reflecting mastery in the outer world. And we can see that these archetypal qualities can be expressed in both men and women.

In the bodhisattva teachings I began embracing when I was fifteen, it was said that we can only bring maximum benefit to other beings if we cultivate the full spectrum of lunar and solar qualities, which are the qualities of our primordial nature. And this is also considered the fullest expression of compassion, because a greater spectrum of capacities means a greater spectrum of skillful means, which are the basis for our capacity to benefit others.

**CL:** In the Krishna bhakti path, both female and male devotees become Radha. There is that sense of what you're calling the solar and the lunar but it's expressed in male/female, and within any one practitioner.

**JW:** And in that tradition they say, "There is only one male—He is my Krishna. All the rest are female."

**CL:** Is that similar to the lunar/solar idea or is it something different? That idea of receptivity specifically that as humans we've always associated with woman, and you could even associate with the anatomy of the female, the yoni, that seems a little different than the lunar/solar image.

**JW:** This is one way we could understand the lunar and solar energies, where lunar is yin and receptive and solar is yang and dynamic, but there are representations that do not limit these expressions to only one gender. Yes, there is the play between Radha and Krishna, where she is clearly lunar to his solar, but there is also the play between Shiva and Kali, where she dynamically stands upon his blissfully quiescent form. There are the 21 Taras, who arise from Avalokiteshvara's lake of tears to dynamically embody different forms of compassionate activity.

In our Western traditions we have Mother Mary as a prominent female archetype, and she is purely lunar. But in the Eastern traditions we also have the dakini, who is playful

and wrathful and an embodiment of energy in all its forms. We have the fierce forms of the goddess, not only Kali but Durga, Vajravahni, Ekajati and countless others, who embody active, dynamic, and sometimes warlike attributes as expressions of wisdom and compassion. Within the awakened subtle body, the lunar energies are represented by Lord Shiva in the crown, where they become the descending nectar of immortality, and the solar energies are represented by Shakti at the base, where they become the ascending fire of awakening.

So we can acknowledge and embrace these polarities without making them the exclusive territory of any one gender. And while the female body is receptive at the level of the yoni, at the level of the gestating womb there is nothing more creative. So the distinction between male and female is not so cut-and-dried, not so readily defined in fixed, binary terms.

I too love the dance between male and female, and in my thirty-five-year marriage with John this dance included a full flow of energetic exchange between us, where we both equally received from and catalyzed one another, equally regarded the other as our teacher, and were equally devoted to the other's well-being. And nothing was diminished by this reciprocity, only enhanced. It never had the effect of blending the colors of the spectrum into some kind of flat, grey neutrality, but was more like including more colors, with greater richness in the flow between us.

As John began declining in the years leading up to his passing, I increasingly embraced a purely devotional orientation toward him, putting aside personal needs, wishes, and preferences to be in service to him, so that the final phase of his life would be as meaningful and comfortable as possible. And while it was difficult at times, I also found great beauty in this purely devotional orientation. But until then our devotion for one another was expressed mutually and reciprocally, and this only added to our exchange, giving us more ways to love one another and making our relationship more alchemical.

**NG:** Everything you're saying, Jennifer, resonates so deeply with my own evolutionary process on the path and being with Lee for many years. I feel an affinity with what you're saying, and I am coming to the same place in my own internal process. There is a lot that I don't relate to anymore that I used to relate to. I don't relate so much to the teachings of nonduality; I don't have the same interest. Things have become more subtle, more earthy, there is so much mystery in the whole process.

You were talking about true spiritual refuge and how it destroys these cozy references for security and affiliation. I'm wondering if you could talk about what true spiritual refuge is on the path? Because in the beginning of the path it may be very different from what it is when we've been on the path for many years.

**JW:** It has to begin with a genuine aspiration toward awakening as our primary motivation, rather than drives for safety, security, or self-esteem through group affiliation or status. When the aspiration toward awakening is our basis, then we can take true refuge—in our primordial nature, in our capacity to realize and embody our primordial nature, and in the teachings and practices that further this. And then we must also understand that what was a vehicle at one stage of the path can become an obstacle at a later stage. If we have taken refuge in a fixed, concretized version of the vehicle, rather than in where the vehicle is

meant to take us, we can lose the living trajectory of the journey in our attachment to a temporary vehicle for the journey.

We could also hold the question, “How do we recognize, enter into, and align with a genuine alchemical process of transformation, and how do we continually give ourselves into that?” And this is always a living, dynamic, and unfolding process, not a static one.

**NG:** You were talking about when the living stream of the teaching becomes concretized into doctrine. It seems like this living stream of the teaching is very much related to the living alchemical process that you are talking about. What I feel disheartened by sometimes in some of my sangha brothers and sisters—we’ve been together a long time, some of us—is that we are not all in the same place in the process. We all have our own individual process, then there’s a group process. There is the tendency, no matter how alive a teaching is, for it to become concretized into doctrine because that is the cultural stream, that’s the direction it’s all gone in.

I have a strong passion, intention, and desire for the living stream of the teaching to continually be alive for me. How do we navigate with the tendency for some people to want to concretize the path? I understand the need for security and affiliation and belonging and all of that, but what can we do to keep the teaching alive in the face of the tendency to concretize it? To want to turn the school into the Church of Lee Lozowick, for example?

**JW:** Well, there could be a fundamental bifurcation in your sangha around this, or there could be a reconciliation that includes both possibilities, honoring the old while allowing the new to emerge. I have found it useful to explicitly teach about the tendency to concretize whatever once served as a vehicle into another stasis, which then becomes an obstacle.

For example, someone with a lifelong habit of defending against their sadness can experience a profound opening when they finally allow their sadness, because so much old contraction and disconnection dissolves with that, and they become filled with openness, awareness, and presence, at least temporarily. But then this living alchemical experience can develop into yet another fixation, where painful feelings are now clung to rather than avoided, and overly referenced as a portal to our deeper nature. And last year’s vehicle becomes this year’s obstacle.

So we need to develop a nuanced, experiential understanding of what it means to be in a living alchemical process, and the signifiers of that in our bodies, our subtle bodies, our minds, and the totality of our lived experience—as well as the signifiers of being embedded in habitual tendencies.

But here is the more thorny issue: It may be that for most human beings, including those involved with spiritual traditions and institutions, the aspiration to awaken is not really their primary motivation. Whatever it is that causes this dormant potential to ignite in a human being, so that the momentum toward awakening becomes real and choiceless, is somewhat mysterious, and can’t be engineered or mandated. It can also bring a certain kind of loneliness, even in the midst of others, because the loneliest point is always at the tip of the evolutionary spear, where we find the least company.

Some years ago I asked one of my Tibetan teachers how he felt about the increasing popularization of yoga and mindfulness practices. There was a long silence, and then he said, with great sadness, that while he could imagine yoga and mindfulness surviving in this

culture as practices for physical and mental health, he could not imagine them surviving as sacred practices for awakening. So even those engaging with spiritual practices are not necessarily motivated by an aspiration toward awakening.

Reggie Ray talked about two ways we can engage the spiritual journey: One is the path of veneration, based largely on venerating the awakened beings who came before you. The other is the path of emulation, where like those great beings, you find the pathway into your own awakening. I resonate more with the path of emulation.

**NG:** That speaks so profoundly to so many aspects of what we are doing. Thank you so much.

**MAY:** I'd like to continue on the same theme. In the last years of Lee's life, he was dying of cancer, and one of the most powerful communications he was making was, "You all have to make the path your own," which is essentially the same thing that you are expressing today. Since Lee died, through grief, anger, and all kinds of deep diving, I've found that I had to focus on my individual sadhana. The more I am willing to take that dive over and over again and really grapple with my individual humanity, Lee's humanity, our karmas together, the living nature of the path and everything that you've been speaking to—the more I experience a liberation of creative energy and ongoing possibilities on the path. And the more gratitude and love I feel for my teacher.

No matter what has happened, whether we have experienced some kind of trauma, or we are just trying to digest intense experience and move to the next level of our journey, moving on is about integrating the experience. Would you speak about this dynamic between the individual and the group in sadhana?

**JW:** If the group is a living alchemical vehicle, then it will support both psychological individuation and spiritual realization, especially if psychological maturity is regarded as integral to spiritual maturity. As human beings, we need to be connected with others and we evolve most powerfully when in the company of others. But we shouldn't have to sacrifice our healthy individuation in order to have this.

I have experienced many spiritual groups where people develop a particular way of being, a way of dressing and talking and even character traits that seem more like an imitation of the teacher than their own natural qualities. But when human beings are evolving in a real and integrated way, not simulating what they think this should look like, they more deeply inhabit our universal nature while also more vividly embodying their unique human qualities and gifts.

**MAY:** We are all unique—not necessarily special, but unique.

**JW:** Yes, and fulfilling our humanity, our humanness, includes both realizing our universal nature and embodying it through our essential human uniqueness—which is different from egoic specialness.

**MAY:** You said that if the organization continued to be an alchemical crucible for the individual, that one sign of that active work would be that people are allowed to be individuals...

**JW:** Yes, yes. Allowed, encouraged, celebrated. And isn't that part of the beauty and vividness of life?

**MAY:** We've certainly got elements of that in our school. For example, there's a way of saying things that's very in-group. We have mantra rings, and rings that say Yogi Ramsuratkumar in Sanskrit. I have loved those rings very much and made very good use of them. But at some point I had to take them off. It was a very powerful thing for me. I'm not wearing them still today. I keep them on my puja.

**JW:** And at one time maybe putting them on was a vehicle for your evolution, but then at a later time it became an obstacle. If we can develop an experiential knack for sensing when we are aligned with the direction of our evolution, then we can increasingly orient around that, rather than around particular vehicles.

**MAY:** I think this is a place where the psychological work and spiritual work come together in terms of getting enough space and integration within ourselves that we can really begin to feel, to have a felt awareness, not a conceptual awareness, a felt awareness, of what's necessary to our growth.

**JW:** Yes, I agree, and see this as both an evolutionary possibility and imperative for humanity. And of course we can make mistakes as we venture into this uncharted territory. We can go in a direction that becomes problematic, but if we know how to pay attention, we will eventually recognize that, and course-correct. I would much rather make my own mistakes and learn from them than passively go along with somebody else's mistakes, however exalted their status. That is part of my heresy.

**MAY:** There is something beautiful and essential about being a heretic. Lately I've been sharing this Hafiz poem with friends: "Religions are the ships, poets are the lifeboats/every sane person I know has jumped off." Jennifer, thank you so much.

**JW:** Thank you so much. I love discovering this affinity with all of you. It confirms that many of us are engaging with similar questions and issues. So, thank you.

**MAY:** May I read one of your poems to close?

**JW:** Sure. Of course.

### **Wrathful Devotion**

You gave me a heart that ignites  
In the passionate knowing of you,  
And having burned in that heat  
Is not drawn toward lesser fires.

You gave me a mind that expands  
To encounter your vastness,  
And finds in those fathomless depths  
Its own luminous nature.

You gave me a soul that won't rest  
With any barrier to you,  
Be it heavy and dense  
Or as gossamer as a veil.

You gave me an old structure  
Made up of my history;  
It is heavy and dense;  
It is gossamer as a veil.

I meet it, allow it, explore it,  
And still it grinds on,  
A machine that relentlessly churns out  
Old patterns and tendencies.

I embrace it, dissolve it, release it—  
Still it keeps reincarnating,  
Rising up from some ancient template  
Held deep in my bones.

I don't begrudge you your sense of humor,  
Beloved Trickster,  
But I do wonder, now and then,  
What you have in mind.

Did you make me to realize a freedom  
I can't fully embody?  
Do my heart and soul burn for a truth  
That I can't fully live?

I commune with you in the heavens—  
It's not hard to find you there;  
But I need you down here,  
In the marrow of my bones.

You can't turn away now—stay here;  
I will have this out with you.  
You started something with me,  
And now I want it finished.

Yes—I will wrestle with you on this one,  
Beloved Torturer;  
I will wrestle you all the way down  
To the very ground

And not rest till I stand  
With the soles of my feet upon you,  
And not rest till I feel you infuse  
My every cell.