

Following the River's Way

An Interview with Arnold Mindell

Interviewed by Joy Gates

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Foreword: Have you ever had the experience of reading a book that changed your life? A book that seemed to call forth spring rain upon your quickening seed? Arnold Mindell's book *The Shaman's Body: A New Shamanism for Transforming Health, Relationships, and the Community* was such a book for me. I was so excited by the vision expressed in *The Shaman's Body* that I read all of his books to which I could gain access. The more I read, the more I felt that Arny Mindell's perspective was indeed in resonance with another book whose message had changed my life, a Chinese book of ageless wisdom, the *Tao Te Ching*, by Lao Tsu. In fact, process work, as Arny shares on page 22 of his book *Sitting in the Fire* has roots in Jungian psychology, physics and Taoism. The Taoist view of life assumes that the way things are unfolding contains the basic elements necessary for solving human problems. (See the end of this article for other important process work concepts.)

So when Roberta Ossana, who knew of my enthusiasm about process science, asked if I would do an interview with Arnold Mindell (known as Arny by many), I eagerly agreed.

It was my first experience with an e-mail interview and I found that it soon took on a life

of its own. It seemed to become the voice of a *timespirit*, an energy communicating about deep awareness, aliveness to mystery and to our interconnectedness.

We invite you in to the quantum field of the e-mail interview between *Dream Network Journal* via Joy Carol Gates and Arny Mindell, author, co-founder of process work, and process-oriented therapist. Listen for the timespirit. DNJ— I've read most of your books, so I feel that I have a good sense of your message. I wonder, after reading one of your more recent books *Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity*, if your time is becoming more focused upon working with large groups in addition to the extreme states work you do each year. Is this so?

ARNY— I work about a third of my time in my practice with individuals, a third writing, a third with larger international scenes and seminars as a whole.

DNJ— It seems to me that the first several of your books¹ demonstrate process-oriented psychology in regard to individuals and their unfoldment. Your more recent books² seem to evolve the focus more fully into the individual's context as well upon group process, how we each can serve our community as we connect with our authenticity, how we can affect the world. In a sense, it seems as though process-oriented psychology first came through in a fashion which was attractive to introverts in particular and now is extending into approaches

appealing to a more extroverted population and to the more deeply committed social activist. Can you comment on this?

ARNY— I only notice now that there have always been two threads for me in psychology. One was inner work, knowing yourself, your dreams, meditation, your relationship to the eternal. And the other has been the world, its problems, beauties, its tensions and awesomeness. Now the thread that my life has been asked to weave is braiding these two threads together. Today I realize that without dreamwork, you can not do what I call “worldwork,” and without working in the world with large group situations and international disputes, with your community and family, you understand your dreams as if they had really only to do with you.

DNJ— I like the way you include some of the concepts of physics in your writing, such as “the quantum field,” in which one’s innerwork and processing of individual dreaming serve to vitalize and purify the atmosphere around one.

ARNY— I don’t think of purifying as much as I think of stepping through consensus reality, through the reality of this person and that object, into the background of that person or object, into what I call the “quantum field,” an uncanny potential from which all things arise. What happens by getting in touch with this field, by getting to the essence of your dreams, body experiences, projections, etc., is that you connect to that non-local essence, are more at home on earth, and enable other beings to feel more at home as well. The home was not purified, it was always just trying to become conscious. [For more on this theme look at Arny’s recent book *Quantum Mind: At the Edge of Psychology and Physics*, Lao Tse Press, 2000.]

DNJ— DNJ’s on-going project of collecting and printing “big” dreams that seem to be dreamed for the benefit of humanity as a whole (“Dreaming Humanity’s Path,” a regular feature now) appears to be another manifestation of this field. Can you suggest experiments that readers of DNJ might consciously use to expand their own individual daily dreamwork, taking this quantum field into account?

ARNY— In my other book about to emerge [in 2000, *Dreaming While Awake*], I suggest many such experiments. I suggest relaxing, breathing deeply, and closing your eyes. When you are ready, open them halfway and notice what catches your attention first. Let your unconscious mind tell you what “thing” to focus on. Then enjoy that thing, ponder it, and ask yourself, what is its essence. And let that essence unfold in any way you like, in movement, in pictures, etc. The unfolding is probably going to help you understand the realm from which your dream images come.

DNJ— Would you say that amplification of one’s process leading to “getting its message” is about the most fundamental tool of process science?

ARNY— Amplification is crucial. It is a tool in the sense that you can do it. But you can do it only because it is a process which is trying to happen. Process is creative, it self-amplifies, trying to make space for itself in our consciousness. Process wants to “unfold,” and does so in various ways and channels, everywhere in our lives, every moment we perceive something. So amplification is a paradox. It is a tool you can use and, at the same time, it is a natural process of unfolding which you can notice happening.

DNJ— How could introverted dreamworkers get a sense of how their dreams might relate to or embrace their community? How could they contribute right where they are through their inner work? How might they realize that they dream for the world as well?

ARNY— The more you experience yourself, the more you know there are no real barriers between you and your desk, your meditation place, and the large world out there. Every time a sudden fantasy emerges, you may feel that another part of yourself is trying to emerge. But if you take time with your perception, and if you notice the very earliest stages of that fantasy, then you will also sense how it is coming from nowhere, so to speak. It’s quite awesome. This nowhere is non-local, or everywhere.

Now the same is true for dreams as well. If you meditate upon your experience, you notice how deep experience emerges into dream

images. If you check on the outside, these dream images will often connect to experiences and events which others experience as well. Thus, simply working on yourself is, in a way, working on the world. If that is your introverted path, namely working alone on your dreams, then you are doing your worldwork in that manner.

However, the concepts of introversion and extroversion are a bit weak. What I mean is that I could just as well say that staying in touch with your deepest self while in contact with others is dreamwork as well!

DNJ— You observe that the essential message of a dream is speaking also through events in our lives, synchronicities and even in our physical symptoms. Is it so then, that all of Life is supporting us in discovering our true nature, and that developing an alert, detached awareness of how the energy is flowing moment by moment in our lives is a very helpful thing we can do?

ARNY— Awareness work is the most exciting thing you can do because it is about the only thing we all are doing, all the time. We just don't admit it to ourselves. Once we do, we realize that everyone is involved in a spiritual practice, trying to follow themselves, their energies, their bodies and life as best they can.

DNJ— What would you say could be the most important attitude or practice that a dreamworker could employ with her/his dreaming process?

ARNY— What a great question. I don't know what to say. The most important attitude or practice? The one which is happening to the individual. What comes to mind in the moment is not trying to practice or do anything. Doing nothing. Noticing what is happening instead. Following, watching the river's way. It will bring you places you never even dreamed you could find.

DNJ— When a dreamworker essentially works alone with process science and becomes enthusiastic about the flow of new revelations how might she/he deal with the possibility of ego-inflation? What does process-oriented psychology suggest?

ARNY— People would not get inflated if another part of them was not trying to put them down. So ego-inflation is not the problem, but the lack of relationship between the everyday mundane self, perhaps an inner critic, and another part which feels like it is god. Awareness of the relationship between parts of yourself is most exciting. We change through the dynamic kind of balance which is always trying to arise between little known aspects of ourselves.

DNJ— What can you say about the time-spirit speaking through people's dramatizations around the calendar event of entering a new millennium (such as the Y2K concern)?

ARNY— The new millennium is a fate most of us will experience. It speaks about the past and the future. It asks each of us a central question: "What is our greatest hope, our greatest dream about the future of the planet earth, of humanity, of our universe?" Each of us is unwittingly answering that question through our experiences. We should not fear asking these great questions, and then putting the answers we sense into practice, even if these solutions take five life-times.

The problem is that we are not aware of our cyber-spatial interconnections, or our interlinkings. Most folks think about themselves only as individuals. In my mind, this is why Y2K is such a problem — it is showing us our incredible interconnection, not only through the internet, but through dreaming. If we become aware of our interconnectedness, there are very few problems on this earth which would remain problems.

DNJ— What timespirit do you feel needs most to be heard at this "millennial" time?

ARNY— Deep democracy, a deeper democracy is needed in our conscious minds, a democracy which takes all the spirits, feelings, dreams and people to be potentially valuable. A spirit which sees all these elements as needed, required, recognizes that they are, in fact, expressions of the Great Spirit. Only when these elements are in dialogue is our world going to feel "right."

DNJ— You refer to the courage needed to move beyond consensus reality and its cultural/

social expectations into the flowing current of the movement of one's full life, into the Tao. How did this challenge you? Has it been like an irresistible force flowing through your nature? Do you have periods of doubt, confusion, impatience? How do you deal with it?

ARNY—— From my earliest childhood, life has seemed remarkable, unbelievable, impossible, and both real and imaginary. It has always been too much, too awesome to comprehend. I have periods of doubt, confusion, impatience, also ecstasy and love. I don't deal with them, but try to embrace what I experience. I watch closely what I am being asked to channel, and then notice all the other experiences I have which agree and disagree with the main one I am having. In this manner, I try to follow as best I can the deeply democratic experience of the Tao which brings all things in due time. When I feel I cannot grasp or deal with the challenges facing me, I let go and dreams and body feelings appear which help me. Then I almost always realize that I feel like I am failing because I have not let other elements within myself help me, other people show the way. That is why today I know I cannot do what I want, but that we can, together. Humility is a wise teacher.

DNJ—— What meditation style is particularly helpful to you? Or do you prefer the practice of alert mindfulness... or a creative combination?

ARNY—— I deeply respect all meditation styles which work for people. The one meditation which I try to do day and night is to ask myself, "What am I now experiencing?" "What is the dreaming showing me in this moment?" "What can I learn?"

DNJ—— How do you center yourself or open yourself to the Greater Life when you feel "off" or "stuck"?

ARNY—— I talk to my partner Amy. If it's late at night and she is sleeping, I imagine being the moon, gently moving the waves of the ocean through the force of gravity, making waves, one of which is my predicament. And then, as the moon, I sometimes sense why I must experience what I do.

However, I never use any one method, unless of course you think of trying to respect experience as a method.

It is a good experience, letting all this flow as it comes! Thanks for inviting me to do it. Hope is it helpful to someone else besides me.

DNJ—— Thank you, Army!

Afterword

What I have experienced through the process of attending to this questioning is the warm feeling that a vaster energy than my own has been and is the true doer. This energy can well be called a timespirit whose message is particularly needed by us now. Or it can be called the Tao.

Process Work Terms

Timespirits —— "A cultural rank, position or viewpoint that depends on time and place. Roles and timespirits change rapidly because they are a function of the moment and locality. Roles in groups are not fixed, but fluid. They are filled by different individuals and parties over time, keeping the roles in a constant state of flux." (*Sitting in the Fire*, p. 42)

Field —— "The atmosphere or climate of any community, including its physical, environmental and emotional surroundings." (*Sitting in the Fire*, p. 42)

Deep Democracy —— "This means that everyone must be encouraged to note and express whatever they are feeling. It means that everyone gives internal permission for these altered states to occur... we give attention to overt and covert social issues and the people who have been marginalized, so we must give attention to the states of consciousness we have marginalized because they were unfamiliar." (*Sitting in the Fire*, p. 187)

Worldwork —— "This deals directly with the atmosphere of a group — its humidity, dryness, tension and storms. This atmosphere, or 'field,' permeates us as individuals and spans entire groups, cities, organizations and the environment" (*Sitting in the Fire*, p. 19). "The roots of worldwork are found wherever people try to make better communities and care for the human rights of others." (*Sitting in the Fire*, p. 23)

Process — “The flow of overt and covert communication within an individual, family, group, culture or environment. Process includes inexpressible feelings, dreams and spiritual experiences.” (*Sitting in the Fire*, p. 42)

Primary Process — “The self-description, methods and culture with which you and your group identify yourselves. ‘Process’ in primary process emphasizes how identity changes in time.” (*Sitting in the Fire*, p. 42)

Secondary Process — “Aspects of ourselves that we, as individuals or groups, prefer not to identify with. Often we project these aspects onto people we view as the ‘enemy.’ We may marginalize or admire these qualities, creating inferior or superior traits in other groups.” (*Sitting in the Fire*, p. 43)

Dreambody — “The part of you that is trying to grow and develop in this life... your wise signaler, giving you messages in many different dimensions. When it signals to you in the body, we call it a symptom. When it signals to you through a dream, we call it a symbol.” (*Working with the Dreaming Body*, p. 39)

Amplification — “The basic idea of amplification is to discover the channel in which a dream or body process is trying to manifest itself, and to amplify according to the channel.” (*Working with the Dreaming Body*, p. 9)

Channels — “Signals may be differentiated according to the perception sense which picks them up. Signals and processes are therefore

channeled by our senses.” (*River’s Way*, p. 15). “Discover the process, amplify its channel, and a symptom can turn into a medicine.” (*Working with the Dreaming Body*, p. 15) [Channels include visualization, audition, body feeling or proprioception and body movement or kinesthesia, our relationships and the world.]

Edge — “An edge forms a definition of oneself and comprises the boundaries of consciousness. It is always associated with ideas, with deep-seated belief systems, with personal identity, with a life philosophy about who one really is.” (*The Dreambody in Relationship*, p. 47). “A communication block that occurs when an individual or group, out of fear, represses something that is trying to emerge.” (*Sitting in the Fire*, p. 41)

Notes

1. *Dreambody: The Body’s Role in Revealing the Self; River’s Way: The Process Science of the Dreambody; Working with the Dreaming Body; The Dreambody in Relationships; Working On Yourself Alone: Inner Dreambody Work; Riding The Horse Backwards: Process Work in Theory and Practice* (with Amy Mindell); *Coma: The Dreambody Near Death; City Shadows: Psychological Interventions in Psychiatry*.
2. *The Year One: Global Process Work with Planetary Myth and Structures; The Leader As Martial Artist: An Introduction To Deep Democracy, Techniques and Strategies for Resolving Conflict and Creating Community; The Shaman’s Body: A New Shamanism for Transforming Health, Relationships and the Community; Sitting in the Fire: Large Group Transformation Using Conflict and Diversity*.