

# London Faerie

## **Transformation & Empowerment, aka The Work**

by London Faerie ([www.londonfaerie.co.uk](http://www.londonfaerie.co.uk)), May 2015

I've been working in the field of personal transformation and empowerment for a few years now, and I occasionally get asked what that actually means. My understanding has changed and evolved over time, but I feel it's broad enough now to share what I've learnt so far. So in this blogpost I'll share some of the main ideas and insights I've gained about the "No Stone Unturned" approach to personal transformation and empowerment which we've developed during the first five years of Sacred Pleasures.

Specifically, I'll look at a few important questions around personal transformation and empowerment:

1. What is aliveness and why might you want more of it in your life?
2. What blocks us from feeling fully alive?
3. What are the main tools we use to address the blocks?
4. What is shadow healing and when does it come into play?
5. What is catharsis and why are so many people into it?
6. How do we know when we're making progress?
7. How can we engage with The Work?

This is the most comprehensive roadmap I've put together so far for these territories of personal transformation & empowerment. Please take my hand and let's begin the journey together.



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## Section I: Aliveness

*Note: for the sake of brevity, I'm going to abbreviate "the work of personal transformation and empowerment" to "The Work" throughout this article.*

In the mid-60s a teacher called Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rajneesh>) began offering a radical new approach to spiritual development, embracing progressive (some would say, outrageous) attitudes to sexuality and some pretty wild methods for opening people up. By 1974 he'd established an ashram in Pune in India, where he received many Western disciples who he initiated as seekers (*neo-sannyasins*). In the early 80s he brought his work, rather disastrously, to the United States, and the last bit of his story is shrouded in scandal and controversy. By the time he became Osho in 1989 he was notorious and many people still think negatively about his work; but for me he was and remains the single biggest and most important influence on The Work.

Although there was a great deal to Osho's teachings, the thing that's always captivated me is his focus on being deeply, truly alive. I have always been a high-energy, intense kind of person and, in the mainstream world I was simply too much. However when I first encountered Osho-inspired people (like the *sannyasins* at Osho Leela), I felt totally met and quite normal! As I investigated what they were into and how they approached their lives and The Work, it became clear that their focus on aliveness was at the heart of it.

So what do we mean when we say "aliveness"? For me, aliveness means allowing more of everything in and through you. In large part this is about emotions and sensations: people who are more alive feel more, sense more, experiencing life more vigorously and more acutely. The highs are higher, the lows are lower and life feels fuller than it did before. There's an intensity that goes with being more alive: a muchness, if you like; a feeling of fullness.

In my experience, as people become more alive, they also feel their connections with other people more intensely. This was a big focus of Osho's work: he invited people to open up to their feelings, feel their connections more deeply, get triggered more often and, through this, learn more about themselves. Although Osho advocated serial monogamy rather than polyamory, a lot of his teachings are about experiencing connections as deeply as possible so we learn the lessons they have to teach us and then move onto the next one. It sounds a bit

harsh when put so baldly, but there's a wisdom in it too, especially when viewed from the perspective of becoming more and more alive.

It's perfectly valid to ask, why would I want to welcome more aliveness in? It might seem like a lot of hassle for little reward, to feel everything more intensely. If this is true for you, of course, then keeping things more toned down is a perfectly valid choice. If however you sense that something in you wants more, then you're probably looking for more aliveness.

More aliveness means feeling more of everything, the good stuff and the hard stuff. Unfortunately it isn't possible to have one without the other - as the range of possibilities increase in one direction, they automatically increase in every other direction as well. Opening to more joy means welcoming more grief, sadness and pain too. It's like having greater emotional bandwidth: once the tube becomes wider, whatever is happening is felt and experienced more intensely.

For me, this is in line with one of my core beliefs: that we're here to suck the marrow out of life. We're here to engage fully with life and to live as vibrantly and intensely as we can. In this regard Osho's ideas and teachings have always sung to me and have inspired me since I first discovered him a few years ago.

A lot of The Work is about welcoming more aliveness and removing the obstacles that stop life from flowing so strongly in us and through us. As I continue to talk about personal transformation and empowerment, it's really worth keeping this in mind. And this leads us neatly onto the next question: how do transformation and empowerment support you to welcome more aliveness?

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## **Section 2: Blockages**

The starting-point of this article is the idea that welcoming more aliveness is a good thing. As I mentioned in the previous section, this may not be right for you - and if it's not, that's perfectly ok. However, when I'm talking about our approach to The Work it's built on the assumption that you want to feel more alive, to welcome more of life in.

If this is true then what would stop you from allowing yourself to feel more? Often, when we start opening up, the first thing we encounter is a bunch of blockages. In New Age circles these are sometimes spoken

about as blocks in the body (“my heart chakra feels heavy and stuck” and so on), and it’s definitely true that some people experience blockages on a physical or subtle level. This isn’t true for everyone (and there’s no reason why you need to feel them this way); but what is true is that just about everyone has some things that blocks life from flowing through them as fully and vibrantly as it could.

So what does it mean to say that there’s a blockage? Most of the time a blockage is a protective mechanism that formed early in our lives (usually childhood) to stop us from getting hurt. Here’s a typical example:

*M\_\_\_\_\_ was a sensitive little girl and cried when she felt hurt or upset, which was quite often. Her parents - in particular her father - didn’t approve of crying, seeing it as weak and pointless. (He was sensitive too and grew up at a time when displays of emotion were frowned upon, especially in men.) So every time M\_\_\_\_\_ cried she was told to calm down or shouted at for being too emotional.*

*By the time M\_\_\_\_\_ was a woman, she didn’t really cry anymore. She blocked the more painful emotions and controlled her feelings so that she wouldn’t show any weakness. She sneered at other women who cried when things went wrong, seeing them as weak and pathetic. She also found it hard to let love in, as a whole bundle of emotions had been blocked along with her sensitivity. She was, however, quite good at getting angry when things didn’t go her way.*

Does this sound familiar? It might not be your story but I bet you know someone who had a similar childhood experience: when we come down to it, the range of childhood narratives is relatively small. Our parents often can’t cope with our strong emotions and the changeability that’s natural for most children. In particular they struggle to allow us to express feelings they aren’t comfortable with themselves.

Here’s another example:

*F\_\_\_\_\_ was a very high-energy boy and easily flew into a rage when things didn’t go his way. He grew up in a quiet, sedate middle-class family in the suburbs of a big city. His parents’ attitude was “nice people don’t behave like that.” Whenever F\_\_\_\_\_ was in “one of his moods,” he’d be silenced with a damning glance from his mother and immediately sent to his room. He was a strong-willed and passionate child so he’d often scream and shout for a while on his own. His parents would ignore him and give him no dinner when he did*

*this; after a few years he stopped and learnt to muzzle himself before the shouting even began.*

Most adults can't handle one or more of these emotions: anger, grief, hopelessness, sadness, loss, joy, bliss, disappointment. Of course the list is much longer than this and richer in its nuances and subtleties. But you get the general idea.

Removing emotional blockages is a very important part of The Work. In a recent article (<http://sacredpleasures.co.uk/2015/03/becoming-whole/>), I likened this to mapping parts of our personal map that are fuzzy or completely dark. Areas where we are blocked emotionally are places we don't know very well or at all. We've learnt to suppress the feelings associated with this 'place' in our psyche, and by now it's simply a black spot, a dense cluster where things don't flow.

As we bring attention, awareness and loving care to those blockages, they begin to dissolve. We discover that it's safe to feel those feelings we weren't allowed to feel before. Often we do this with the support of a therapist, practitioner, lover, workshop facilitator or community. Through this healing, whether it happens individually, with another or in a group, we release the blockage and open up to more of life.

I don't want you to underestimate how intense that process of unblocking can be. Often it's intensely emotional and sometimes also deeply physical. Sometimes we use body-based processes to activate the emotional memories (for example, body de-armouring) and sometimes we recreate the situation to evoke them. Whatever techniques we use (and I'll talk more about our approach later), our aim is to dissolve the blockage and allow more life to flow in us.

With each blockage we dissolve or remove, we become more alive. Where there was numbness, now there's feeling; where things were stuck, now they flow as they're meant to. At first it can hurt a lot to feel all these feelings - especially as we'll usually have a backlog to clear before we can feel the normal ups and downs of life in flow. This is why the process itself can seem very intense and involve heavy catharsis and big expressions of emotion - though as I'll explain later, this isn't always necessary or even useful.

Although this is a necessarily brief summary, I hope it gives you a sense of what blockages are about and how dissolving them helps us to be

more alive. But how do we actually do that? This is the subject of the next section.

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### **Section 3: Tools**

When we first step into The Work, the range of approaches and modalities on offer can be utterly bewildering. Should we get our chakras realigned or have some intense de-armouring? Should we seek out a therapist for reparenting or find an Inner Child support group? Body or mind? And what's all this energy stuff that people keep talking about?

It's not my intention to give you a comprehensive summary of the myriad tools that exist to help you open to more of life. Instead I'd like to share a bit about the approach we use at Sacred Pleasures (which we call the "No Stone Unturned" approach) and why I think they do a great deal of good with as little peripheral damage as possible.

This last point is very important and it's where I want to start. Often in The Work we go into dark scary parts of our psyche and the risk of peripheral damage is very high. Careless, clumsy and ill-intentioned work does more harm than good, and often we don't know till afterwards that we've done damage rather than healing. Think about it this way: would you go to a clumsy surgeon to have your knee repaired or a part of your intestines removed? If you thought they might bash your insides a bit or fuse a few things together by mistake, would you risk it? No, I thought not.

Our psyche is every bit as fragile and precious as our body - if not more so - and a lot less understood to boot. So care and attention to who you allow to poke around in there is vital, in my opinion.

With this in mind, what are the tools that we use to help people to transform and empower themselves? Well, the first is perhaps the simplest and most powerful of all: *pleasure*. One of our great inspirations, Dossie Easton (<http://dossieeaston.com>) talks about the radical proposition that "sex is nice and pleasure is good for you." It sounds so simple and yet it's revolutionary. As the world of 'sexual healing' expands and grows, it's easy for us to forget the most basic gift that's available in this work: to enjoy and to expand through pleasure.

Most of us are geared for struggle and assume that life has to be hard work. This includes me - why, after all, would I call transformation and empowerment “The Work”? I didn’t call it “The Joy”, did I? We have it soft-wired into our systems that things have to be tough and intense in order to be worthwhile. So the idea that pleasure can be transformative and healing by its very nature is radical, potentially even revolutionary.

There are myriad other reasons why experiencing pleasure is massively powerful and transformative. We remain in the legacy of thousands of years of guilt and shame around our sexuality and around the delights that our body can effortlessly provide for us. By giving ourselves and each other permission to simply enjoy, we begin to shift this. And we do so in a lighter, gentler and softer way than words like ‘healing’ and ‘transformation’ might suggest. We simply take another step towards a pleasure-focussed paradigm, a return to what’s natural for us as human beings.

One of my deeply-held beliefs is that we’re here to enjoy life. I don’t say this in a frivolous way - though frivolity is something I also welcome. I say it because it seems to me that we’ve been given an incredible planet that provides for us without too much effort and amazing bodies that enable us to experience so much joy. On the other hand life is inherently tough and scary, and above all we’re born knowing that we’ll age, decay and eventually die.

So we’re here to enjoy life while surrendering to it and letting it slip through our fingers as gracefully as we can. At a very basic level, this is what it means to be human - and every religion and every philosophy attempts to address questions, fears and concerns around this.

Giving ourselves permission for pleasure is important because it turns our focus back towards joy. I notice that, when people are working hard on themselves, the whole thing becomes lighter, easier and more effective when they allow themselves to enjoy it a bit more. This is true of just about anything in life - from your pile of admin to the washing up - and it’s absolutely true in The Work.

Pleasure itself is transformative. In a world where we feel so up against it, pleasure takes us back into our bodies, back into the moment and back into the flow of life. It’s like a great big exhale - *ahhhhhhhhhh* - allowing everything to relax and surrender a bit before tension rises again. And you can be sure that it will rise again! So enjoy the pleasure when it comes and see how fully you can surrender to it.

Another key tool in The Work is belonging. As human beings we long to belong. It's one of the few things we can say with confidence: we need food, water and community. Of course there are exceptions to this, as there are to any rule: but for most people the desire to belong is central to being human. This is why they say in *Sex At Dawn* that the threat of exile is as bad, if not worse, than the threat of death.

At Sacred Pleasures we create spaces where you can experience belonging without compromise. We call this sex-positive community because we don't have a better name for it, but it's actually so much more than that. It's a sense of being able to welcome more of yourself to yourself while being accepted fully by the rest of the group. It's a place to include the bits that get left out elsewhere: the peculiarities and perversions, the longings and lustings, the vulnerability and the shame, and everything else that's hidden somewhere inside you.

Permission and belonging are vital to your transformation and empowerment. How can you learn to love and accept yourself fully if you have to hide parts of yourself even from yourself? As you allow yourself to show those hidden, secret and maybe shameful parts, something amazing happens. Light comes to the darkness and a bit more life begins to flow through those parts of you. And all that energy you were using to keep those parts of yourself hidden suddenly becomes available again. It's just amazing.

Whether we do this in groups or individually, this feeling of belonging and everything that goes with it is absolutely critical to The Work. I hear a lot of people being taught to hate bits of themselves, to criticise their egos and to bash them. I don't find these approaches effective or helpful, because bashing is what caused the damage in the first place. Those parts need even more love, even more acceptance and even more tender loving care than the rest of us. Only then can we transform those parts of us and move from ego-states like gripping, holding, struggle and isolation into flow-states like letting go, allowing, ease and connection.

Through this powerful combination of allowing pleasure and being loved and accepted as we are, most of The Work happens on its own. However, sometimes things come to light as a result of these new ways of relating to ourselves and each other that need specific attention. This is where our Shadow Healing approach come into play - and that's what I'll talk about in the next section.



## Section 4: Shadow Healing

So far I've talked about why aliveness is valuable, how parts of our aliveness get blocked through negative experiences and how experiencing pleasure and belonging can transform these blockages. However, certain issues are deeply embedded, and instead of transforming these issues, things like trying for pleasure or joining a community just reinforce the existing patterns.

An example:

*J\_\_\_\_, a man in his 50s, begins to attend conscious sexuality workshops. He likes it because he gets to have some intimate contact with attractive women, many of whom are quite a bit younger than him. He has a slightly creepy quality that makes some people uncomfortable, but the community is built on acceptance and openness, so people try not to mention it too much. And anyway, the creepiness is only very low level, nothing you could really put your finger on.*

*At a certain workshop, J\_\_\_\_ ends up all alone during the play session at the end. When it comes to share in the circle, he goes into a familiar language of blame, describing his experience without looking honestly at what he's done to co-create the situation. There's a collective tensing up in the group, as everyone avoids the elephant in the room.*

*At this point, J\_\_\_\_ has a choice. He can keep coming to workshops and, most likely, the experience will repeat. He can stop coming and get busy with the story that 'these are not really my kind of people' or some other avoidance. Or he can take a step deeper into The Work and find out what's really going on in this situation.*

*Most likely, "Creepy Older Guy" is not who J\_\_\_\_ really is. It's a mask he wears to avoid deeper, more uncomfortable feelings he doesn't want to look at. Underneath it, J\_\_\_\_ feels isolated, lonely, afraid and a bit hopeless. But he's a 50 year old man and showing how fragile he actually feels just isn't the done thing. Like most of us, he's grown up in the culture of rugged individualism, where it's OK to express anything except hopelessness and despair. So he covers it over with the mask of "Creepy Older Guy", which allows him to maintain a tone of superiority and aloofness while studiously avoiding the deeper work.*

This is where Shadow Healing can really help to shift things. It's not a comfortable or easy process and it has to be handled with a great deal of

care. Because what we do in Shadow Healing is to go back to the 'site' of the original trauma and touch it very carefully, with heaps of awareness and the intention to transform it.

Before this happens there's usually a kind of cracking, some kind of breaking-down, in which the person realises that they're no longer able to uphold the mask - whatever that mask is. (The mask of "Desirable Young Woman" is a perfect complement to "Creepy Older Guy" and is no better or worse.)

This cracking can be extremely painful for the person experiencing it and everyone around them – especially in group-space, where everyone feels everything so acutely. At the same time, it's the essential first step without which healing can't happen. As Leonard Cohen rather magnificently put it, "There's a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in."

So first, the crack. Then we bring awareness to what is revealed beneath. Very often, but not always, it's a childhood or teenage trauma. This is what I call the 'site' of the trauma: the place where it first happened. Often, after the first crack, the person remembers things they'd forgotten for years: this happened when I was 8, I recall that from when I was 4 and so on. Sometimes a bunch of other memories, echoes of the original trauma, come back too. It's amazing to witness this tumbling out, as suppressed memories come to light and beg for the person's attention. The psyche is both delightfully poetic and weirdly efficient in its way of working - though not in a mechanistic, linear way.

Once we've identified the site of the trauma, there are a few things we can do. I laid this out in more detail in a previous article, which you'll find here: <http://londonfaerie.co.uk/2012/10/shadowhealingscore/>.

For now, let me summarise the main approaches that we take. (Note: in this case "we" means Sacred Pleasures and other practitioners using similar approaches. It's not in any way meant to suggest that these are the only approaches that can be taken.)

1. Give the person what they didn't get in the first place. Often when someone touches an emotional wound or trauma, it's clear that there's something they didn't receive at the time. An example of this is the little girl who was consistently ignored by one of their parents. Whatever she did, she never got that parent's attention, and in the end she stopped even trying. So now we give her the opposite. We give her the fullness

of our love and attention, with boundaries set by her to keep herself safe. Maybe she just wants to be witnessed while she draws and paints. Maybe she wants to be cuddled and stroked and told what a good girl she is. Maybe she even wants things to become sexual - after all, these wounds often carry through and get played out again and again in our sexual lives.

This approach works well when the site is really accessible; in other words, when the person is in an open, vulnerable and receptive space and they can receive whatever it is they didn't get before.

2. Recreate the trauma 'one last time'. For many people, the coping mechanisms they create end up being more robust than the traumas they respond to. To continue with the example above, maybe the little girl who got ignored became a woman who doesn't need anything from anyone. Fiercely independent, she does everything for herself and by herself, allowing no one close to her for fear of being hurt. If you try the 'give her full attention' approach mentioned above, she'll probably just get bored and wonder why she's bothering with all this healing crap anyway.

In this case, the person has buried the trauma and the 'site' is harder to access. To get there we need to create similar circumstances to the one she experienced as a child. This is where the tools and techniques of BDSM can be so valuable as instruments of healing. In our example we might tie her up and ignore her while she struggles and vies for our attention. Perhaps we'll make the bondage really uncomfortable to remind her of the discomfort she feels inside.

At first she might stay in her pattern, turning away and pretending that she doesn't need our attention. But in most cases (and especially when we build in little features like making it uncomfortable and maintain a strong healing intention), she'll turn back and try again. And we'll ignore her again - and again, until she's able to express fully how much it hurts.

Our intention here is not to re-traumatise the person but to recreate the trauma in order to release it. The important thing is that positive intention, shared between everyone involved in the healing scene. This is reinforced by the use of safewords, another key technique from BDSM, so that the person secretly remembers that she can always escape if she really needs to. In this way the recreation is just a game, because the gun we're using actually fires blanks. Despite this, the psyche somehow treats the situation as real and the healing happens anyway. But the

safeword is critical to give the person that escape route if they really need it. This time they have agency and can stop things if they need to.

3. Combine the two approaches. Often, recreating the circumstances gets us to the site of the original wounding but it doesn't quite heal it. So there's a beautiful 'trick' we can play, when the wound is raw and exposed, which is to change things up and give the person exactly the opposite of what they received before.

So in our example, we ignore the person until they're well and truly triggered and then turn our full, undivided, loving attention on them. We ask them what they need and we give it to them with an open heart, so they really open up through the pain and then get a dose of exactly what they need poured into them, a salve to the wound.

There are a few variations on these approaches and techniques, but the basic principle remain the same. Naturally enough, it's the skill, sensitivity and awareness of the people involved that determines how effective the healing is; and above all, the shared intention to transform that which remains stuck.

Sometimes, when we do these things, there's a lot of catharsis. People wail, they scream, they shout until they're hoarse and they cry - a lot. And sometimes there isn't. Catharsis is one of those things that, since Osho, has been heralded as A Very Good Thing. However, having facilitated The Work for over 7 years, I have learnt that not all catharsis means The Work is happening - and not all quiet, inward processes mean it's not. In the next section I'll talk about why that is.

Credit: our approach, which I call Shadow Healing, is something I've developed over a number of years of personal research and professional practice. It's built on research done by pioneers like Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy (in particular, through their amazing book *Radical Ecstasy*) and was developed in dialogue with peer practitioners Claire Black, DK Green and others. Although I still use the working title "Shadow Healing" to describe this approach, I would welcome a better moniker for it – all suggestions welcomed!

## Section 5: Catharsis

In the previous section I wrote about the Shadow Healing approach we use to help people heal and transform things that are deeply embedded in their psyche. At the end I mentioned catharsis, “the purification and purgation of emotions—especially pity and fear—through art or any extreme change in emotion that results in renewal and restoration.” Very often when we touch deep wounding and trauma from earlier in life, we experience a large cathartic response: shouting, crying, raging, wailing and so on.

In some somatic approaches this is described as “getting the negative emotion out of our body.” And perhaps, sometimes, that’s exactly what’s happening: there may well be correlation between “blockages stuck in the body” and releasing them through catharsis. A well-known example of this is the AUM meditation, developed by Veeresh at the Humaniversity and used as a way to access and release strong emotions.

Having done processes like the AUM quite often on my journey, I’ve grown increasingly dubious about a simplistic, one-to-one correlation between catharsis and shifting blockages. I experience the picture as a lot more complex than this. For some people, especially those who find it hard to express and let go of certain emotions, catharsis is often just what’s needed. But for others - and I’m one of these - the opposite can also be true.

There are three things about catharsis that make people want to keep having it:

1. it gives you an adrenaline spike and leaves you feeling raw and alive for a little while after
2. it gives you the feeling that you’re getting somewhere
3. it’s something you can **do** to heal yourself

I often see people hooked on catharsis because it feels like something’s happening - but in practice this doesn’t guarantee it’s actually helping or doing what we need it to do.

More than whether something is being released, a good question to ask is: am I on the edge of my comfort zone? If you are, you’re probably where you need to be, as the edge of the comfort zone is often where The Work happens. As a friend of mine smartly pointed out, this vulnerable place isn’t necessarily fragile or delicate - for some, the most

edgy thing they can do is to express rage or state a clear boundary. So a really important factor in determining whether a process is helping and whether catharsis is necessary is to look at how much genuine vulnerability you're experiencing.

(For a more detailed explanation of working with the comfort zone, please see <http://londonfaerie.co.uk/2013/01/comfort-zone/>)

I'll use myself as an example of this. I get angry quickly and often. I'm like a flamethrower: my temper flares up suddenly and then dies down just as fast. It's scary and unexpected, or so I'm told by those brave enough to confront me about it.

So when I go into an anger response during a process, this is actually quite familiar and often not a vulnerable space at all. For me there's something definite, clear and empowering about rage: it's known, it's familiar, it's something I **do** rather than something I truly feel.

By contrast, a really scary and vulnerable place for me is "I don't know." Ask me a question to which I should the answer but don't and I may well bark at you. My anger masks a deeper vulnerability I don't want to show: "I don't know."

So when I'm in some kind of healing process, the thing to look out for is the place 'beyond' the familiar anger, where I'm able to experience helplessness, being lost, the "I don't know" that scares me so much. Because here, where I'm genuinely scared, is where I still need nurturing and transformation.

So how do we discern whether we're getting to the bottom of something or not? This is a complicated question in itself and can't be answered in a few words. However, some useful pointers are:

- How do you typically behave and is what's happening now in line with that (i.e. am I maintaining the pattern) or is it something different / new?
- As either the person receiving the 'session' or the person giving it (or both), do you have a sense that there's somewhere 'behind' this release that would be richer, deeper and more authentic?
- What's happened in similar processes before and where has it taken you?

- What's the 'goal' or 'aim' of the session and are you there (or on the way there)?

Discerning whether we've gone as deep as we can with a particular issue is something that comes with practice. Too much and we can do peripheral damage; not enough and we don't quite reach the spot. Overall it's better to fall short than to go too far - but as we get more confident in The Work, the 'just so' place is something we learn to sense and find instinctively.

What's also important is to recognise that the person receiving the session is always the best judge of where things are going and how things are landing - especially in the days that follow the experience itself. All too often I see people getting told "that's just your resistance" or, worse, "that's just your ego" when they're in fact protecting themselves from further trauma by stopping someone from clumsily poking around inside their psyche.

It's definitely true that sometimes a person outside the process can see where things need to go; but it's also true in most cases that pushing doesn't help. This is why I'm wary of de-armouring and other intense processes that 'force' the body to release things that it might not be ready to let go of yet. Armouring and other blockages are there for a reason: they formed as layers of protection and they need to be released carefully, consciously and with love. Bashing away by violently pressing points or using strong vibrators will certainly make the person feel alive - as they'll be ultra-adrenalised and super-freaked-out - but you can be sure that the blockages will come back twice as strong in response to the trauma of the 'treatment' and to protect against more damage.

To me these hard approaches lack sensitivity and are often outside the person's consent. I've seen people shamed by groups and group leaders into going way beyond their boundaries and then congratulated for doing so. This doesn't feel good to me. When our psyche is ready to shift something or let it go, it's not necessary to apply a lot of force to make that happen. We are, and always should be, willing participants in our own transformation. Often the best motto is "Watch and wait for the moment it's ready to move."

In this section I've given some reflections on catharsis and explored the question of whether it is helpful or not in different situations. There's

also a longer-term question of whether all this hard work actually gets us anywhere; I'll turn my attention to this in the next section.

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## **Section 6: Progress**

Up to now we've looked at the Sacred Pleasures approach to transformation and empowerment, with a particular focus on Shadow Healing as a technique when things are entrenched and need 'strong medicine'. Now I'm going to talk about the wider view and how we can assess whether and how much we're making progress.

Firstly, a bit of context. My mother was an early adopter of New Age and Holistic approaches: in the 70s and 80s she learnt psychotherapy, rebirthing, massage and a host of other practices and tried just about every remedy going. Throughout my childhood I heard about one miracle cure after another, from St John's Wort to drinking your own pee. Because of her temperament (and remember that I was between 8 and 15 when most of this happened), it all felt very final: this one is the final cure and will fix everything. Now this one will. Now that one.

By the time I left school I was deeply skeptical of all of it. It seemed to me, as the somewhat-traumatised survivor of my childhood, that none of it had fixed anything. In hindsight this seems a bit unfair, as my mother had a lot of issues and probably did make some progress - but the fact remains that there was a huge gap between what she thought was happening and what I experienced in terms of her behaviour.

I share this because it's important for what I'm going to say next. For me, the most valuable and worthwhile yardstick of your progress is: other people. You can literally talk all day long about the progress you've made, carefully detailing all the changes that have happened internally as a result of the amazing workshop or session you just attended. But if you're still the same bad-tempered git you were before, then what's the real point of The Work?

Get feedback widely and often. Ask people you trust to tell you what they think you should work on and ask them later if they feel you've made progress. Be open to bad news as well as good news. You think that you're less socially awkward than before. What do your friends think? Ask honestly and receive their feedback graciously. And if the news isn't as good as you hoped, give yourself a hug and look at where you still need to make progress.



As well as using other people as a reference-point for your personal growth, I'm a big fan of ruthless honesty as a tool in The Work. If we're really authentic with ourselves, we usually know what needs changing. Usually we're not really satisfied with that aspect of ourselves anyway and we know it needs some attention. Sometimes we're blind to it, but if we remain open our friends will tell us what we need to know. But most of the time, really, we know ourselves.

And the themes are not generally complex, difficult to understand or particularly abstract. I know, for example, that I need to work on aggression, particularly in relation to women. I also know that stillness is an aspect of me that is underdeveloped and causes a restlessness and - guess what? Aggression. In addition I know that I can crowd spaces and be overbearing with my presence, my voice and my opinions - particularly when I feel threatened.

So if I really want to measure my progress, I'm going to be asking myself and those close to me if I'm doing better on those themes. I'm going to keep it simple and I'm going to ask them to be honest. I'm going to ask open questions like "how do you see my aggression in the last few weeks?" and listen carefully to what they're saying - and what they're not. If I'm really good I'll use Nancy Kline's excellent method for receptive and present listening (outlined in the evergreen masterpiece Time To Think) and not say a word in response.

I encourage you to keep an eye on the wide view as well as the narrow one. You may think that this workshop you just did has definitely and finally sorted that thing you were working on, but did you say that last time and the time before too? Are you spiralling into deeper layers of the same issue (yes, that happens) or just going round in circles without making progress? More importantly, do you see long-term changes in the big themes of your personal growth, whatever those are for you?

What I've said in this section is common sense, isn't it? Yet in the crazy world of personal transformation and empowerment we often forget the basics in favour of more elaborate explanations and approaches. Usually we do that to justify entrenched patterns and avoid deep and lasting change. As Alan Lowen ([www.artofbeing.com](http://www.artofbeing.com)) beautifully puts it, some people will do anything to change, anything at all, truly anything - as long as it doesn't mean they actually have to change!

Do you want to be another workshop junkie who isn't making progress? Be firm, clear, loving and honest with yourself and you'll know where you've done well and where you still need to work.

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## **Section 7: Your Journey**

Through this series of articles I've explored the work of transformation and empowerment ("The Work") in the terms that I've come to know and understand it. As I said at the beginning, this is not designed as a comprehensive summary, nor would that be appropriate - there are myriad approaches and this is only one of them. However I hope that what I've written has helped you to understand better how we at Sacred Pleasures approach The Work and the logic behind it.

When I began writing this article, I had one eye on the fact that, at the start of July we have our first week-long retreat: Together // On Holiday. Despite the title and the rather jolly banner, the first half of this week is going to be a deep exploration of Shadow Healing, culminating in us co-creating healing sessions for each other on the Tuesday afternoon and evening.

Between us, Marti & I are going to share some of the things we've learnt over the past 7 years of personal exploration and professional practice, giving you tools and techniques to help you heal and transform so you can feel more alive and become a freer fuller version of yourself.

So this is the first thing to mention: if you're at the right stage in your journey to dive deep and explore what's still stuck and blocked in you, then please check out Together // On Holiday (4-11 July) and see if it's for you. It's one-half Shadow Healing course and one-half sex-positive retreat: through the storms of personal growth and on to Paradise!

(Find out more at <http://sacredpleasures.co.uk/holiday/>)

At the same time, as this essay has evolved it's turned into a longer, more comprehensive piece than I originally expected and now stands as the most complete description of our "No Stone Unturned" approach I've produced so far. In writing it I've reminded myself that not everyone reading this article is ready for Shadow Healing and other strong approaches. So here are some other things you can do to make progress on your journey.

1. Psychotherapy. These days psychotherapy is seen by some as a bit old-fashioned, and there's even a trend in certain circles of saying that it's dispensible if you just do enough work with and on your body. (Here's a great article from Steve Bearman about why that isn't and will never be true: <http://www.elephantjournal.com/2013/10/dont-trust-your-feelings-somatics-the-pretrans-fallacy-steve-bearman/>)

For me, psychotherapy is a powerful foundation for later work. What's great about psychotherapy is that it's slow and patient, allowing you to make progress at your own pace and never confronting you with things before you're ready. As I said earlier, the psyche knows what it needs and what it can handle; it doesn't need to be bullied or coerced. In the early stages of The Work, this means being extremely patient with oneself (or one's client) and waiting for things to come to light gradually over months or years.

At the same time, for a bunch of reasons both inherent and historical, psychotherapy doesn't go all the way to the end of one's healing and transformation. That's why for me, it's a great foundation and a valuable part of the journey rather than all of it. One only needs to look at the myriad somatic practices that have arisen alongside it to recognise that more than just talking is necessary.

2. Coaching. I'm one of many people who work as a coach, supporting people to map out the next steps of their journey and then take them. Coaching takes many forms: it can be practical and work-focussed, it can be about relationships and it can be about personal growth. It can be a combination of these and also include other areas.

What's nice about having a coach is that you have an ally on your journey. It's someone to talk about your progress with. It's someone to keep you on track when you get disheartened. It's someone to celebrate successes with and to moan at when it's a bit tough. It's an buddy on the road, a fitness coach for your soul.

Coaching is different from psychotherapy in terms of frequency (you see the coach less often) and the way you work together. It's well-suited for someone who's guiding their own process but appreciates an outside eye and some support along the way.

To find out more about my coaching work, please visit <http://londonfaerie.co.uk/coaching>.

3. Other practitioners. There are literally thousands of practitioners out there: those who work with energy (reiki, acupuncture etc), those who work with the body (massage, osteopathy etc), those who work with sexual energy (sexological bodyworkers, Tantric healers etc) and a host of other approaches. Finding the right person or people to work with can be a bit of a mission but it's worth it.

There are a few recommended on our links page (<http://sacredpleasures.co.uk/recommends/links>). Whether you find them here or elsewhere, I recommend reading about practitioners and allowing things to happen a bit randomly. I'm sure everyone has at least once had the experience of looking for something, forgetting about looking and then it miraculously 'appearing' through a recommendation from a friend or a leaflet through the door. This is the Law of Attraction at work – asking and then being guided to the answer. It's not the only way to find what you're looking for, but it works well in conjunction with other approaches.

4. Groups & community. As the holder of the space called "Sacred Pleasures", I'm a big fan of groups and community. There's some stuff you can do on your own or with an individual practitioner, but there are other things you can only do in a group. Naturally it helps if it's a well-facilitated group – but it does need to be a group, as being part of a group evokes and stirs up different things.

On our links page there are a few communities and workshop-based groups that we recommend - and again, this is just the tip of the iceberg. A great way to feel into whether a group is for you is this: meet some of the group's members and ask yourself, are they the kind of people I want to hang out with and do they live the way I want to live? If the answer is yes, give the group a go and see what happens. And if it's no, look elsewhere. Simple!

5. Your life. As I said earlier in this essay, a lot of The Work just happens. It happens when we go to a party and have a nice time, when previously we would've been filled with anxiety and hidden in the corner. It happens when we open up to our partner in a new way and shed some old layers of fear and shame. It happens when we read a book and get that ah-ha moment. And it happens in the quiet times, the spaces between, the moments when our mind goes quiet and our wider awareness creeps in with insights and wisdom. It's happening all the time, because The Work is your life and your life is The Work.

In conclusion, remember this: you are and always will be the best guide of your journey and the person who knows best what you need. All too often I see people asking others what they should do rather than thinking and feeling for themselves. They do so for two reasons: firstly, because it means they don't have to be self-responsible; and secondly, because they've been told again and again that others know better than them (starting with their parents.)

At its heart, our approach is the opposite of this. It starts from the assumption that each and every one of you is a brilliant guide for your own journey; and we trust that your psyche is seeking integration and wholeness. We also invite you to be ruthlessly honest with yourself - or, as my friend Katie Sarra ([www.katiesarra.com](http://www.katiesarra.com)) and others call it, to stalk yourself fearlessly. This is where honest feedback from good friends helps, because there are some corners around which you just won't be able to see.

However, this support and help is just that - it's a collaboration between you as the hero of your journey and others as the map-readers and spotters of signposts. It's not "I know you better than you know yourself." It's not "you're going to pay me a lot of money to smash your ego and join my cult-like group." It's not even "Let me take responsibility for your life so you don't have to." None of these will get you where you're going. What will is an attitude of openness, awareness, honesty, self-responsibility and self-love, supported by close friends, allies, the occasional professional and some well-chosen courses.

Bon voyage!

London Faerie, May 2015

[www.londonfaerie.co.uk](http://www.londonfaerie.co.uk) | [www.sacredpleasures.co.uk](http://www.sacredpleasures.co.uk)



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