**Eastern Wisdom, Inner Work, and Aging: A Contribution to Second Wave Positive Psychology**

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**Abstract**

This paper proposes to make contribution to second wave positive psychology by suggesting a post-egoic view of humanity that overcomes the positive-negative binary and sees all attributes and qualities of human experience as containing rich and holistic materials for ego transformation. It is pointed out that the ego-based psychology that undergirds much of current positive psychology ignores the mutual nature of human existence and a sense of humanity being continuous with the rest of the universe. Using aging as the context for a case study, this paper makes the case that when aging is viewed from a post-egoic psychological perspective such as is inherent in Daoism, what emerges is a possibility of living a life of wisdom, compassion, joy, and qi-infused creativity through aging as ‘saging.’ This paper affirms that aging is a critical and integral part of human growth and development. Additionally, a creative inner work example is provided that demonstrates a possibility of integrating and transforming negative experience in the service of moving towards a post-egoic self.

**Limited views of human psychology**

Much has been cogently said that historically positive psychology is based on a limited view of human psychology and philosophy (Sundararajan, 2005; Miller, 2008; Wong 2011). The authors of this paper characterize this limited view as follows: First of all, positive psychology is based in ego psychology, by which we mean psychology pertaining to human beings as understood to be encapsulated atomistic selves. In this view, all positive and negative attributes or qualities are the properties of the ego self. This ego-based worldview ignores the mutual nature of human existence and a sense of humanity being continuous with the rest of the universe (Tu, 1989). Most centrally, positive psychology emphasizes the positive and completely neglects the dark material, what Jung termed the Shadow. Second wave positive psychology includes the ability, centrally, to use what might be called positive energy to go in to and explore the sSadow and grow from this expiration.

Secondly, positive psychology is prey to binary thinking that categorically separates the positive from the negative, whereby, predictably, the positive is valorized the over the negative. This is a static and limiting view of humanity, and operating out of this view, we are prone to giving psychological advice that people move out of the negative ways or even don’t pay attention to them, and focus on moving towards and into the positive ways. Yet there are many worldviews, Chinese thought being one, in which the positive and the negative are polar opposites that are dialectically conjoined and operating together (Wong, 2009). Practically speaking, the so-called negative ways in which people think and behave are not extrinsic to who they have become, and they can’t just get rid of them, as if taking off and throwing out an old garment one no longer wants. But, even if people can somehow manage to deactivate or keep out of sight the negative that is in themselves, the result would be that they are functionally left with only parts of themselves and less materials to work with in terms of holistic expression, hence limiting options and choices.

Thirdly, in terms of conceptual analysis, ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ are not static or invariant qualities, attributes, or assessments of the self and the world. What one considers ‘negative’ one day may turn out to be positive another day, and so on, as a beloved Taoist story illustrates:

*There is a Taoist story of an old farmer who had worked his crops for many years. One day his horse ran away. Upon hearing the news, his neighbors came to visit. “Such bad luck,” they said sympathetically.* *“Maybe,” the farmer replied.*

*The next morning the horse returned, bringing with it three other wild horses. “How wonderful,” the neighbors exclaimed. “Maybe,” replied the old man.*

*The following day, his son tried to ride one of the untamed horses, was thrown, and broke his leg. The neighbors again came to offer their sympathy for what they called his “misfortune.”*

*“Maybe,” answered the farmer.*

*The day after, military officials came to the village to draft young men into the army. Seeing that the son's leg was broken, they passed him by. The neighbors congratulated the farmer on how well things had turned out.*

*“Maybe,” said the farmer.[[1]](#footnote-1)*

Taking the abovementioned critical points into account, in this paper, we propose a view of positive psychology that (1) takes an expanded view of humanity going beyond the ego-based psychology; (2) holds a holistic view of humanity so that we can access both negative and positive qualities for fuller, more holistic, psychological work; and (3) concretely works with the positive potential in the negative for expanded and robust transformational results. To accomplish these three goals concretely, we have chosen a context of study that is conventionally seen in the North American cultural context as unambiguously negative: aging. And we will enlist conceptual resources from Asian philosophies, especially Daoism, to show how aging is an integral and critically important part of human growth and development. The guiding question for us in this task is: how do we understand and work with aging so that wisdom, compassion, joy, and graciousness emerge?

**Aging**

Very commonly negative views are held about the aging process. Typically, aging deprives us of what we once had: vitality, youthfulness, full faculty of cognition, physical beauty, stamina, endurance, and so on. Within the North American youth-worshipping culture, aging is often viewed as sorrowful, if not shameful, decline and loss (Cohen, et al., 2014). Implicit in this perception is an egoic view of humanity and human development that characterizes the progression of human life as starting with birth and ending with death, during which time, there is just a steady and one-directional decline in youthful vigour and culminating in demise. Contrast that with a holistic, beyond-ego, and non-linear worldviews such as Daoism. Ming-Dao (1990, pp. 4-5) states:

The Taoists believe that it is humanity’s refusal to regard itself as part of a greater order that causes confusion, ignorance, and sorrow. They feel that if human beings could balance themselves with this order, they would live a simple life of happiness and understanding. This divine order is regarded in mystical terms; it is so great, so profound, that it cannot be grasped by merely rational means. Declaring it to be the mystery beyond all mysteries, yet the doorway to all existence, the Taoists simply call this fundamental reality by a single name: Tao.

If we were to approach and understand aging from within the Daoist worldview of greater order and mystery, seeing aging growing more fully, beyond the ego development, into a mystery, we would have a very different feel for and attitude towards aging. The starting point of discourse on aging, then, would not be assuming that aging is negative, and that we try to ease or compensate the negative, or even that we need to find anything positive in the negative. Rather, the starting point would be to see aging as a unique and special stage for working with expanded possibilities beyond humanity, as such aging is a privilege – of becoming increasingly united with an existence that embraces aging and death as creative possibilities inherent in the universe. We would see aging as an ongoing progression into eldership and wisdom. Consider Chapter 1 of Dao De Jing (Lao Tzu, 1972, p. 19):

Existence is beyond the power of words

To define:

Terms may be used

But are none of them absolute.

In the beginning of heaven and earth there were no words.

Words came out of the womb of matter:

And whether a [hu]man dispassionately

Sees to the core of life

Or passionately

Sees the surface,

The core and the surface

Are essentially the same,

Words making them seem different

Only to express appearance.

If names be needed, wonder names them both:

From wonder into wonder

Existence opens.

A whole paper, nay, a book, can be written to just probe and ponder the above verse, but, for our purpose, we want to a feel for a view and a feel of human life reaching beyond the conventional sense of ego-psychology, wherein, our life is part of this “From wonder into wonder/ Existence opens.” Aging is not closing of life: it’s an opening into the greater wonder of existence. Chapter One as rendered here and elsewhere alludes to the emergence of the content of existence from the "womb of matter." Those who are in the stage of life referred to as 'aging' are faced with either contemplating the 'womb' from which they emerged, and to which they are moving ever closer as an object of contemplation, or of attempting to avoid such contemplation. The last line, "Existence opens," seems to offer a possibility of existence beyond the embodied. Perhaps the question of consciousness as existing beyond one's earthly existence is alluded to here.

In the Daoist view of aging, there is a sense circularity in that we return to a stage that’s similar to infancy: openness, receptivity, vulnerability, naivety, and sensitivity. In infancy we are open, receptive, and so on, through not yet having built up our ego personality constructs. In aging, we may get there through transformation of the ego constructs that we built up and used to survive in the world. Transformation of egoic structures is given a place of honour in classical Asian view of human development. Consider, in addition to the Daoist view we are mainly focusing here, the traditional South Asian culture in which a later adult developmental stage is marked and is known as renunciation (*sannyasa*). Renunciation (Sri Ramana Maharshi, n.d.) is not running away from one’s home, family, and the world. Rather, the narrow-beam of individualistic survival focus, for which ego construction was necessary, now loosens and expands to embrace greater reaches of love and wider concerns for the world. In other words, aging is a potential movement into becoming a sage for others when our consciousness can expand and increasingly and wisdom and love can become a core part of our being. Such a view and its expression offer a consciousness possibility beyond binary views, and suggests that the sage is emerging from the aging process, and a potential for contribution is emergent.

It is good to remind ourselves, however, that becoming a sage while aging is not an automatic outcome. Self-cultivation, that is the result of growth of the authentic and true self, and self-knowledge is needed to do, shall we say, *aging thus saging*. Gaining self-knowledge through self-cultivation is overarches the classical Chinese philosophy of life (Ames, 1993) that sees human development as striving toward becoming whole, whereby the micro units that are human beings increasingly unite with the macro whole of the cosmos, embracing both life and death in the process. Practically speaking, becoming whole is achieved through becoming increasingly integrated within the mind-body-heart-soul-spirit continuum, transforming all manner of human-made divisions and separations, and reclaiming the original cosmic unity of being (Bai et al., 2018). What results is an increased flow of energetics throughout the micro (in the individual) and macro (in the unity of the individual and the universe) channels coursing through the human body (Kohn, 2005). Such is what we can look forward to in aging, as understood and practiced in the Daoist self-cultivation. We now explore in greater depth the cultivation of flow of energetics inherent in the Dao-field suffused with creative vital force.

**Qi philosophy**

For the Daoists, the entire cosmos is suffused with the vital force of creativity, known as qi (ki in Japanese and Korean). Human creativity is not separate from cosmic creativity, but is its manifestation. Through disciplined power or virtue (*de*), we can access and collaborate with creativity inherent in the cosmos and its entire constituents. Surely this is going far beyond working with positive attributes or qualities as in positive psychology.

Human beings are made of qi just as the whole universe is (Tu, 1989). On the basis of this understanding, the Daoist (and the Buddhist, too) would claim that in this universe everything is interconnected and interpenetrates. Hence, inside and outside, positive and negative, and all other binary terms, interpenetrate, making the usual categorical boundary between two polar terms a moot point. The Daoist ontologies are through and through relational. Hence, creativity does not, and could not, reside solely inside an individual as a property of the individual; rather, creativity is a co-emergent property of the relational field, the ‘Dao-field,’ within which individual beings participate, and of which they are a part.

Thus, how strongly or fruitfully creativity is expressed is, then, a function of the richness of the local relational field in which the individual is embedded as well as how ‘skillful’ the individual is in fully accessing the riches of the local and beyond-the local field. Within the framework of Daoist philosophy, then, what we are establishing here is a two-fold notion that 1) creativity suffuses the Dao-field; and that 2) individuals’ access to creativity is gained through their *conscious participation* in the phenomenology of this Dao-field. As we will discuss below, *emptying* one’s (ego) self, and thereby *becoming one with* the whole, which is the discipline of wu wei (non-doing), becomes an essential discipline for the practitioners of Daoism and their increasing ability for creative living. Again, what we are offering here is a look towards the yonder field where positive psychology could go for further growth.

**Creative human agency**

Dao is a field phenomenon (Ames, 1989). Dao expresses reality that is pregnant with rich and dynamic possibilities of innovation and transformation. De is the human agency, as in virtue and power: the human’s disciplined and cultivated ability to participate in and access the potential of the Dao-field (Ames, 1989). De as human agency is the ability to turn potential into an actual. cultivation of De is the way to access and manifest creativity. It is illuminating to note that while the standard translation of De is ‘virtue,’ this character has also been translated as ‘power,’ which is, in our view, etymologically more correct. In the context of the present discussion about human creative agency, then, *virtue* would mean the *power* to access and participate in reality that goes far beyond the positive and the negative assessment and labeling. We can quote Rumi here: "There is a field beyond right and wrong. I will meet you there."

In speaking of human creative agency, we are not talking about ‘exceptionality’ and ‘specialness’ as is the case in our conventional thinking around creativity. For the Daoists, creativity is really just an ordinary act in living life. There is nothing exceptional in a creative person being and expressing their true nature. However, all the same, efforts need to be made to remove various obstacles and binds in our personhood, to become the “[t]hirty spokes converg[ing] on a hub, but it's the emptiness, that makes a wheel work” (Pine, 2009) so that we can participate more fully in the relational interplay of all aspects of life. This idea of empty space or emptiness is central and critical in both Daoist and the Buddhist philosophy of human transformation. Entering this space through contemplative means, such as meditation, is what would take a person to go beyond working with the positive and the negative as in positive psychology.

**Wu-wei for post-ego psychology**

Chapter 16 of Dao De Jing (Pine, 2009) states:

keeping emptiness as their limit

and stillness as their centre

ten thousand things rise

we watch them return

creatures without number

return to their roots

returning to their roots they are still

being still they revive

reviving the endure

knowing how to endure his wisdom

not knowing is to suffer in vain

knowing how to endure is to yield

two yield is to be impartial

to be impartial was to be the ruler

the ruler is Heaven

Heaven is the way

in the Way his long life

a life without trouble

The ultimate going-beyond of the positive and the negative is this idea of emptiness. In Daoism (similar to Buddhism), emptiness is understood as the super creative matrix--the womb--out of which all phenomenal world is born. But, in practice, how do we enter this space? The answer is simple; yet, the practice is difficult. What is needed to enter this transformational space of emptiness is shedding the layers of ego-self. It is the ego-self that seeks what’s positive and negates or neglects what’s negative. To go beyond the ego-self is hence the first step in taking positive psychology to its next incarnation. There are many challenges to taking this next step. Consider Chapter 48 of Dao De Jing (Lao Tzu, 1944/​1972, p. 66):

Chapter 48

A man anxious for knowledge adds more to himself every minute;

 a man acquiring life loses himself in it,

 Has less and less to bear in mind,

 Less and less to do,

 Because life, he finds, is well inclined,

 Including himself too.

 Often a man sways the world like a wind

 But not by deed;

 And if there appear to you to be need

 Of motion to sway it, it has left you behind.

We hesitate to offer any further explication of this already richly interpreted and annotated Chapter 48 in the Daoism literature, but we would like to pick out a few themes for further elaboration in the service of framing post-egoic positive psychology.

1. We interpret the first line as making the point that filling up with knowledge will degrade and destroy life energy, *qi,* effectively shutting down the flow of creativity.Note, then, how the conventional and prevailing accumulation approach to knowledge acquisition would be ill conducive to the life of creativity and transformation.
2. Lines 3 to 7 recommend aligning with the universal by emptying out and making space for life. This implies, as we maintain in this paper, that creativity is not an event inside an individual. Creativity emerges from the individual connecting (“becoming one with”) and aligning with the universe (i.e., in our terminology, the Dao-field).
3. Line 8, “But not by deed,” indicates that influence is more by *being* than by *doing*. Being is, according to the Daoist philosophy, a result of *wu wei (literally, non-doing)*, which requires ‘emptying,’ that is, emptying of the egocentric notions, desires, and ways. This non-doing, however, is not passive in the sense of inaction. It is a way of being that encompasses action and is the outcome of being attuned to the melodies, rhythms, and harmonies of all aspects of the moment, with the awareness that each moment is the end point of all that has come before, even from the beginning of time. A person in ‘performing’ wu wei is neither moving nor moved; rather he or she is at once as fully as possible coordinated and integrated with all the qi energy of the moment in that particular spot of the Dao-field. Through such coordination and integration, a moment of creativity emerges, fully uniting the doer and the deed. We quote Ming-Dao (1990, pp. 185-186) for his excellent, non-confusing, interpretation of wu-wei:

Wu wei means acting without conscious thought. But we must be very careful here. We certainly all have met people who are thoughtless, who never think before they act, who, in fact, barely have a notion of what is going on at all. Yet this is not wu wei; it is confusion, ignorance, and abdication of involvement. Other people borrow the concept of wu wei and make it a superstition. They don’t do anything, especially when confronted with a serious decision, and let whatever happens happen. They’ll trust in the universe, or Tao, or some other presence in the ether to live their life for them. But this is not wu wei either. True living of wu wei is to live in accord with Tao and to attain a state of such perfect understanding and insight that all actions are spontaneously correct. There is no scheming; there is no selfish motivation; there is no conscious desire to impose your will on others or on nature; there is not emotionalism; there is no irrational behavior; there is no acting according to trends, or what priests say, or what society says, or what divination says. There is only acting, yet there is nothing that you do not accomplish.

1. Lines 9 and 10 are a reminder that effort of will by any means is a sign of having left the Way (Dao). Again, this notion is in great contrast to the Western existential paradigm that seems to undergird positive psychology, and celebrates the individual’s will and the ability to singlehandedly make things happen by fiat.

**Aging as Saging**

So far, we talked a lot about Daoist philosophy. In this section, we wish to get down to practice. How do we move into the space of wu wei? How do become increasingly post-egoic? Again, let us discuss this in the concrete context of aging that is, within the North American context, seen inherently negative. Within this context, we can reframe our question and ask, how do we become Daoist sages as we age? There are many barriers—social, cultural, political, institutional, familial, and above all, psychological—to enacting aging as “saging” (Schachter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995). The stigma of aging is very strong in our North American culture, and the socio-economic reality is that poverty is a common feature of the aging population. Our health and social services are certainly not set up to support individuals who are aging to devote their time to self-cultivation in the abovementioned ways of transformation/renunciation. While we validate and appreciate various continuing education opportunities that we see offered around us for elders, we feel that another kind of practice can be added: inner work.

To become a person of wisdom requires an ongoing practice of inner work that has the aim of engaging ever more deeply in the process of becoming whole, or to use the well-known terminology of Asian thought, *enlightened*. Awa Kenzo, a Japanese archery master states: “The essence of Buddhism is not meditation or liberation from samsara. It is *kensho, “seeing into your nature”* (Stevens, 2007). Here, we give a psychological interpretation of “seeing into your nature,” and we will link that to inner work. Ordinarily, our perceptions are thickly clouded with projections that come out of personality structures that have been intrinsically embedded since the earliest days of an individual's existence. Recall that personality structure is the ego structure: the way we have learned to put on a defensive or protective structure in response to survival distress brought on, that is in reaction to withdrawal of love from our caregivers or other significant people, however that may be manifested behaviourally, in our relational world. “As our egoic selves, we are preoccupied by internal ruptures, and we are not able to look and feel beyond our ego-encapsulated selves” (Cohen, Bai & Fiorini, 2014, p. 343). From within this psychological understanding, our observation is that we are most often not aware that we are possessed by these egoic structures and that we mistake what we see through our egoic structures for reality. Perhaps in the twilight years of our lives, when much of our life tasks of ‘making it in the world,’ making a family and supporting our children, or some other worldly engagements, are achieved, can be golden opportunities for us to engage in daily inner work and move strongly into post-egoic development, which is certainly intrinsically connected to the ideas and practices of second wave positive psychology. To quote further from Ming-Dao (1990, p. 188):

Wu wei in daily life, then, will come only when one has wisdom and maturity. After we have lived life fully, perhaps travelled extensively, come to know ourselves and other intimately, then it is a simple thing to respond to life spontaneously. We do not need to scheme, to plan, to plot strategy. We act with unconscious insight, and without doubt. Like the ideal artist, we would only act as nature itself would have acted, so we cannot make any mistake.

Having aged, that is, having passed a large number of years in life, can create a greater possibility for becoming a whole person, one who grows, becomes increasingly whole, and demonstrates the characteristics of a fully alive, compassionate person, one who demonstrates a high level of capacity in living with and for themselves, others, and the planet. It goes without saying that this letter is not guaranteed.

In this paper, we propose that a sage is unified with the creative process. In fact, life/death and the creative process are one, and a sage is one who has realized this truth and lives it moment-to-moment. A sage is thus an embodiment of creativity inherent in the universe. An aging person who has been and continues to be engaged in their inner world. Inner work, and energetics can allow him or herself to be increasingly alive and creative. She or he will be very present in each and every moment, will not be worrying about the future, nor possessed by the past, and will be the epitome of spontaneity and responsiveness to the moment, the circumstance, and the overall context.

**Becoming Whole through Inner work**

Daoist philosophy and practice are centrally about becoming increasingly whole as a human being who is becoming aware of his or her interconnection with all aspects of the cosmos. It is illuminating to note that the etymology of ‘whole’ and ‘heal’ go back to the same Old English root, ‘hal,’ which goes back to Proto-Germanic ‘haila’: these root words mean ‘undamaged’ or ‘unhurt.’[[2]](#footnote-2) Taking the cue from this word origin, we would say that becoming whole requires us to look at and work with the hurt part of our being. This hurt part is kept in what’s known as the Shadow (Jung, 1961/1989). Just as we hide our wound under the bandage and away from others’ view in order to protect it, we do the same with our psychological wounds. But, just as not changing the bandage and re-dressing the wound daily would cause festering, psychological wounds too need attention and care. Such process we call *inner work*, and is work that we see as core along with the associated relational work to facilitate a truly authentic and ongoing transformational possibility

Inner work is the psychological work that focuses on the identification and transformation of egoic constructions (Cohen, Bai, & Fiorini, 2014; Cohen, 2015) that impair the fullest possible expression of the life force (Ki/Qi). The roots of impairment almost invariably stem from the earliest days of the existence of a person. The inner work to uncover, heal, and nurture a person for the return to the original and natural process is the Daoists describe, and is human growth work based on humanistic (Schneider, 2004), existential (Frankl, 1985), and process-oriented psychotherapies (Mindell, 1990/1991). The psychological work softens and transforms the egoic structures that were formed to protect the soft inner core (Schneider, 2004; Cohen, 2015) of the person, and to open the way for increasing egress and access to the vital force that will flow increasingly freely through the transformed and more malleable egoic structures, becoming expression channels rather than the previously armoured and incarcerating structures. Below, we go a little more deeply into inner work.

If fragmentation and consequent oppression and marginalization of parts of human beings are the usual societal fragmentation that creates wounding, then by the time we arrive at our late adulthood, he or she likely has many wounds to heal and a serious measure of wholeness to regain, unless a person has been working on themselves from very early days. In any event, wounding takes place when the developing human being, especially in the critically tender and vulnerable stages of infancy and early childhood, is not fully received and attended to with sufficient acceptance, unconditional love, care, and respect. Circumstances that prevent such attention and reception can range from natural or political disasters, critical illnesses, ignorance, and all sorts of psychological and relational issues that can afflict caregivers and the general culture/society in which both caregivers and developing children are embedded. Of note in this account is what is known in psychological literature as attachment issues (see Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1965; Bowlby, 1988; Siegel & Solomon, 2003; Winnicott, 2002). Attachment to caregivers and other supporting adults around the child is extremely critical to the robust and resilient development of young children. Developmentally secure attachment results in psychologically secure children who can meet and handle challenges with ease, resilience, friendliness, confidence, and graciousness. Developmentally insecure attachment refers to emergency-measure ways that children who are not well attended to, cared for, and supported, cope with deficits of care and support and overwhelming challenges by fragmenting and even disintegrating their consciousness and identity and/or blocking and shutting down their vitality. If these measures are successful, these children, in other words those of us reading this article, survive but at the cost of thriving and flourishing. They survive but they may be psychologically and energetically wounded and scarred. These wounds and scars are inscribed into the structure of a human being, leaving him or her less than whole.

 To become a whole being, one needs to redress the wounds and heal more completely. One might question whether such wounding is not the dominant experience in our current civilization, and if so, how it is that people seem to manage to get by and even to succeed. The question to be asked, however, is: ‘At what cost do people get by and succeed?’ We contend that the cost is extremely high. Amongst individuals who are living in a state of distress that is so seamlessly integrated into their being, many are barely or not at all aware that anything unnatural is occurring. Our response: the evidence is in the state of the world in human relationships at every level. War is going on in the world. It is also going on in our homes, at our workplaces, in schools, and within individuals. This warring state of being in most instances may not be overtly violent. It is more insidious. It shows up as lack of connection to self, other, and the natural world. Insensitivity is prevalent. Even those who seem to be sensitive are frequently reacting to their own fear of pain and/or of being rejected for not being ‘nice.’

 Inner work (Cohen, 2009/​2015, p. 29) is the work we do with/in our psyche: first we need to recognize all the subtle and not so subtle ways that we have been fragmented and blocked through a whole range of personal circumstances and structural societal issues, all the way from dualistic and oppressive world views to less than optimal parenting. Since these fragmentations and blockages are very often seamlessly inscribed into ourselves, we will need to discover and transform them from within - in our mind-heart, psyche, in our nervous systems, and so on: “[Inner work] refers to reflective practices conducted under the gaze of consciousness, which depends on a developed capacity to self-observe, to witness experience” (Cohen, 2015, p. 29).

Inner work is a way of working on and with perceptions, sensations, memories, and cognitions, all of which constitute a person’s experience. Inner work necessarily involves the unconscious. Jung’s idea of the Shadow (Jung, 1961/​1989) that is descriptive of the dark and unknown aspect of human consciousness is central here. Night is a time of not seeing, not knowing, having to rely on senses other than vision. Night time is all too readily associated with fear. Jung’s idea of the Shadow, which was one of the issues that led to his separation from Freud, was that the Shadow contains everything, not just the base aspects of human nature, or the trauma, but the potential: the undeveloped possibilities of a human being. We would add further that a similar potential resides within the Shadow of the Collective Unconscious (Jung, 1961/​1989). The work with this Collective is, of course, on a different scale than the work with the individual. Such work, however, is not separate from the individual’s work. In fact, the inner world and the outer world are microcosm and macrocosm. We see the work within the individual and with the collective as deeply connected. Inner work does not mean that it has to be undertaken in solitude, with no help, guidance, and support from anyone or anything. Crucial elements in the work of becoming whole are the relational field, community, and other-than-human relationships that affect and are affected by each person engaged in inner work. Work with the Shadow certainly ought not to be seen as preferred alternative to the 'positive.' In fact, attention to both, and all that exists along the continuum between these two possibilities, is an expansion of transformational learning beyond the realm of Positive Psychology.

Inner work is a vast subject, and we certainly can’t do justice to this topic in this paper. However, the point we are making here is that, from a Daoist philosophical perspective, inner work that heals wounds of fragmentation and alienation would be necessary for creativity to flow and permeate a human being. There are countless ways that we can engage in inner work, for example, counselling, journaling, and dreamwork. Below, we provide one example of inner work in the form of dream work by the lead author of this paper, Avraham Cohen. This subsection below is written in the first-person singular voice of Avraham Cohen.

**Night Dreaming**

Dreams are manifestations of consciousness. Dreaming can take place while awake and asleep. The latter is an expression from the unconscious of a sleeping person. My dream demonstrates an inner world drama with three scenes:

 *Scene One: I am with my wife. We are having a very big conflict. I am very upset. No matter how hard I try I cannot get through to her. I see her as relentless and impenetrable. I feel alone, lonely, completely helpless, and very frightened.*

*Scene Two: I am by myself. I am holding a small container shaped like an ampule. It has a small opening neck that opens into the larger body of the container. I have in my hand a piece that will fit perfectly into the neck to totally contain the contents. Inside the ampule there is water that almost but not quite fills the ampule. I am holding the ampule so that it is horizontal with the biggest parts facing down and up. In the water is a largish spider. It is a light tan colour bordering on golden. I like the way it looks. It starts out under the water but moves to a place where it just breaches the surface of the water. I am debating within myself whether to put the stopper into the opening.*

*Scene Three: I am outside. A National Football League (NFL) game is taking place on the street. The quarterback drops back and throws a very long pass downfield; the proverbial long bomb. The pass is a magnificent demonstration of his athletic ability and arm strength. The pass is well beyond the length of the field, far out of reach of any potential receiver. It bounces off a building beyond the end zone at the level of the fifth floor.*

Now, a piece of inner work arising from my dream: I conduct an inner work narrative based on a number of humanistic, existential, and process-oriented approaches to becoming increasingly whole as a human being (Cohen, 2009/​2015; Davey, 2007; Magid, 2002/​2005; Maslow, 1971; Mindell, 1991/​2000; Siegel, 2010; Mindell, 1994/​2001). It is important to note that the detail and content of inner work that is demonstrated arises out of many years of practice and experience. The idea here is to give the reader or not an idea about this process and practice and not to teach how to perform such inner work. The purpose of such personal reflection and inner work is to shed light on aspects of identity that are out of the awareness of a person and that have a significant programmatic hold on how a person is in the world. Once the patterns of being that have been constructed, that are less than authentic identities, and that are outcomes of personal history begin to emerge, the work addresses the intent, most often good, that was implicit while the ‘method’ was unskilful. An intrinsic part of the process is the transformation of these ways of being and identities into a more natural and integrated ways of being for the person. As well, integration between the previously dis-integrated dimensions is facilitated (Schellenbaum, 1988/​1990; Schneider, 2004).

Scene One has existential and tragic dimensions to it. If I put myself back into my afflicted identity, I am in a state of fear. I am helpless, impotent, and certainly not happy. I cannot reach this person who is very important in my life. This is a good replication of my early years where I felt very alone in my family and in the world. A very frequent statement at that time that would emerge from me in moments of profound angst and that was directed most frequently towards my mother was, “No one understands me.” I now realize that hearing this must have been very painful for her. At the time, it was a truth for me. It is a theme that has played out over and over in my life. I have spent my adult personal and professional life searching for connection, meaning, and to be known in a profound and intimate way and to know other(s) similarly.

Scene Two seems to represent a decision-making process; a decision about containment, freedom, being alive, and I believe a quest for enlightenment. I now hold a dialogue with the spider in my dream.

***Spider****: “I realize I could drown in here. Yet, somehow, I am at ease. I see Avi holding my fate in his hands. I know that as a spider I have an ability to survive and to crawl into small and dark spaces. I want to connect to Avi.” “Avi listen to me.”*

***Avi****: “What? What do I hear? Who is speaking? I must be going crazy! Surely, that bug cannot talk. What kind of bug talks? Are you talking to me?”*

***Spider****: “Yes!” Finally, after all these years you hear me. We can work together. We can form a powerful bond. Let us join together.*

***Avi****: “Me and you? We are two different species. How can we possibly connect? What are you?*

***Spider****: “I am a representative of all the parts of you that you have not been ready to see and know.”*

***Avi****: “You are a part of me?”*

***Spider****: “Yes!”*

***Avi****: “Whew! That is very strange.”*

***Spider****: “So it seems, and yet it is the case that I represent every disowned part of you. We have a lot of work to do.*

***Avi****: “I see…”*

This brief example of dialogue development with inner world manifestations represents a step in the ongoing process of identifying disowned aspects of myself and establishing connection between them; in short, developing better and more integrated relationships within myself.

Scene Three shows an unusual event in an unusual location. The person throwing the football, the quarterback, demonstrates an amazing strength and power. He throws the ball an amazing distance, and it hits high up on a building. What I note is that while his performance is an incredible demonstration of power, the throw is actually useless and falls to the ground. He will have to start again from the same location on the field and with less opportunity for success. What’s the message here? For me, it is about some tendencies I have to not being attuned to the whole context of a situation while still being focused in the moment. It is not just about being extremely capable of doing something. It is about shaping performance in a way that is consistent with all factors and with the wanted outcome. In fact, the point is really to move increasingly towards your personal capacities for creativity, which includes living as a creative act. Such a person will have increasing moments of ‘just knowing.’ ‘Doing’ in the mode of wu wei (non-doing) we previously explored is then a completely natural outcome at any given moment. This is the development of a self that is ‘empty’: a self that is increasingly able to manifest wu wei.

**Coda**

 In this paper, we have attempted to make our contribution to positive psychology by addressing the limiting view of egoic psychology and showing how to expand beyond the latter. We took aging as a conceptual case study and illustrated how we would understand and work with aging. In the process, we introduced inner work as a way of transforming our existential wounds into access points that facilitate movement as is captured in the book titled by Abraham Maslow (1971 *The Far Reaches of Human Nature*.

 We end our paper with a small poetic offering on the theme of becoming whole:

***Life in the Known and Unknown World***

*We once wished upon a star.*

*We realized that the very star upon which we wished*

*was wishing upon us.*

*When we listened with our most fine-tuned sensitivity we heard the star’s wish:*

*I wish you to know that we are totally composed of star matter.*

*We are not separate, not one little bit, not from anything.*

*We are part of an immense whole.*

 a. cohen

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*Written by Dennis Adsit* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.etymonline.com/word/whole [↑](#footnote-ref-2)