

Tattoos and Transitions: A Conversation with Kate Burns and Rodney Waters

Zoe Tao: So how did you guys get connected with the Jung Center?

Rodney Waters: I started becoming interested in Jung when I was in college-I read *Memories Dreams Reflections*, and then I moved to Houston in 1990 and not too long after that I became aware of the Jung Center and started taking classes, probably '97 or so was one of my first classes. And I just loved learning more about Jung and since then, I've started my training in Zurich.

Kate Burns: I did not know much about Jung when I was in college. I came across his work through reading the highly popular book, *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, and many of us were reading it at that time-it had just hit the shelves and I was just enlightened or something-there was sort of in there a light that led to many of the answers that I knew I was seeking at the time. And even the questions became more lucid whenever I read the book. So that started me on my journey, and that was in 1994. And I was just on a path, I was following a thread. I immediately looked for a Jungian analyst-I lived in Dallas at that time-and I found one, and I put myself in analysis, and then that led to Zurich. In the meantime, my husband at the time and I moved to Houston. And that was like 1997, and that's when I became more active in the Jung Center of Houston.

ZT: So what attracts you both to Jungian Psychology?

KB: Goodness, so many things. I think for me, it answered some of the questions about our relationship to the mystery. I was in the middle of a lot of spiritual questions whenever I found *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, or was presented with it. And it's like, I had so many questions and they're all swimming around in my mind right now-but it was the connection I needed that started to make sense of things and one thing led to another, and it helped me to not only make more sense of myself and my own life, but to accept myself and make more sense of my own limitations, and to accept those as possible gifts.

RW: I would echo Kate's response, certainly in terms of the spiritual quest-my background is music, my degrees are in music and I still am very active as a musician, and I think so much of Jung made sense to me coming from the artistic point of view. You have practical concerns, you have things that need to be disciplined, things that need to be worked out. But ultimately there is-as Kate said-there's the question of the mystery. There's something inspired, there's something spiritual, and how to explore that and how to leave the doors open for that. The other thing that really struck me when I got to Zurich last fall, that I love about Jung, is that it's approachable from so many different disciplines and different angles-there are people like me with a more humanities and artistic background, there are people with psychology/psychiatry backgrounds, or people with academic backgrounds. And Jung is open enough and acknowledges the subjective journey and the subjective response to things so that there are many, many different entry points. And one thing for me as a musician that has been really interesting to find is how these different disciplines mix and go together-how do arts and Jungian psychology mix, how does the spiritual mix with the political or with ecology-all these things. And I think Jung leaves room for all these questions to be explored.

ZT: Do you think there's sort of a common thing that Jungian students, and people who take classes in Jungian psychology, are seeking?

RW: I think the spiritual answer is part of it, possibly, but I think everyone is driven by their own need to make sense of their own subjective experience. You know I think we all end up in it, just like Kate said-I certainly ended up in a tough place in my own life and started analysis and that uncovered layers, of realizing patterns that I've built up over years, certain attitudes toward things that because they were unconscious, I didn't realize how much that was controlling the directions that I was going-and so I found that work meaningful. So I think one thing that students of Jung have in common is their own personal need to find meaning and make sense out of their struggles and their lives.

KB: I think one thing students of the Jung Center come here seeking is an alternate way of encountering the spiritual world, other than what organized religion has offered them in the past. We are in a time when organized religion is being questioned, more often than any other time I think, and it's perhaps gotten too far from its source. I'm not sure but people are trying to find their own solution without leaving behind the relationship to mystery and the spiritual and to meaning for their own lives, and it all in the end boils down to, what does my existence mean on this planet? Is there a meaning, and if there is, what is it?

ZT: So going along with this sort of spiritual significance that people are trying to seek in their lives, did that motivate you two to offer this class on tattoos?

KB: I would say that Rodney was the one who envisioned the whole tattoo project, but I would say yes it is. What we found is what Rodney was noticing in his own work and his own tattooing process, and this is what he shared with me-that I'm talking to people and they all sort of have a story a lot like mine. And I became interested in that because I was writing a book called *Paths to Transformation* and because I knew what Rodney's process was-he had shared that with me-I knew that his process was transformational in character, and I was on board with it. Let's just see-what if our hypothesis is true. And we have discovered that it's really a very wealthy mine of information, of stories and essentially of meaning.

RW: I agree, that's so wonderfully put. For me, it was very personal-tattoos weren't anything I particularly thought I would ever do, but I thought they were cool. But of course as someone interested in Jung, symbols and images are very important. So there was one particular symbol that had been with me my whole life, and I thought, well you know-this was about 4 years ago-I'm like forty five, I might as well get a tattoo. Why not? It's such a common thing now. But what I didn't anticipate were the psychological ramifications of getting the tattoo.

Much like in dream analysis, an image comes forward. As you work with the dream and as you understand what that image is asking you to be conscious of, that sort of pushes one forward in a transformative way. And so the idea of taking an image that's very important or means something to you, and having it as something that you literally live with, and what that brings to the surface, is bringing things out of the unconscious. Because the other thing that we've discovered is that there are all these levels when people get tattoos-what the symbol is is often very, very important but just as important is the timing. We've met people who would say, oh, that doesn't mean that much to me anymore, but when they describe the time in their life when they got the tattoo, that is incredibly significant. They would say, this tattoo means that I wouldn't be who I am now had I not been who I was at that time, and it's a constant reminder. So we just got into fascinating conversations because I thought if it had this influence on me and this sort of profound effect, how do other people experience it? And many people are very very conscious about getting this tattoo, wanting this symbol, because it means this-and they're very very conscious of what they're doing. Many people are very unconscious but upon reflection come to the same conclusions, that clearly something was emerging from my unconscious. So we've found it to be a real wealth of ways to talk about about images emerging, and about new life.

ZT: Are there any particular tattoos or images that strike you as, not necessarily universal, but very common?

RW: A lot of things come up-there of course when you think of the traditional tattoos that fall into many different categories, there's the Asian style tattoos and there's the dragon or the koi fish tattoos that are clearly symbols of transformation. There are tattoos of memorial but a lot of people have memorial tattoos or tattoos to mark a specific date or event or relationship or end of a relationship.

KB: My first thought was the tattoos that are symbols of transformation, and we found a wealth of dragons and serpents. There is the key motif-the key is a symbol of unlocking a mystery in general, so there's a lot of that. A key is a symbol of transition, movement from one situation in life to another situation in life. And this is one of the many things but one of the primary things that we notice about the tattoos gotten at that time was when a person was either contemplating a transition, or didn't know they were contemplating as a transition but it was right there on the horizon, or they had just accomplished the transition-and sometimes right in the middle of all

the chaos of transition, they'll get a tattoo. Because it grounds them-the image grounds them. So, these are the things that we have explored in the workshops. You see, we had embodying the soul-what does it mean to have the image on one's body. Well, our body is very much about our identity. And then the next thing is psycho-genesis. What is that impulse that originates the tattoo, and the tattoo then becomes the end of it, the teleological process that emerges from this first impulse?

ZT: So it's a dynamic thing in itself-it's something people look back on and it just changes meaning throughout the years.

KB: Yes, it can do that too. This year we're looking at transitions, and how the tattoo figures in to these major life transitions. So what we've been blessed with is the people who are willing to participate who have had the-as far as I'm concerned-the most dramatic transition that a person can have, and that is from one gender to the other. So, we'll be looking at that for this upcoming seminar.

RW: Right, so we will be looking at the transgender issue and how that plays into it, but also how that is just a very clear and maybe extreme version of all of our transitions in life, where an inner identity doesn't necessarily match an outer, and how that's also a part of tattooing-putting something on your body that reminds you who you really are. Another thing that we had discovered that was really really meaningful, as many people who had had traumatic pasts or abuse or really really difficult situations, is that it's also a way of owning one's body. You know, it's a kind of taking ownership and responsibility back, saying this doesn't belong to anyone else-this is mine-and how it connects inner and outer in that sort of way. That's what was going on inside them and needs to be matched.

ZT: I've seen articles where someone who maybe had a surgical procedure that's left scars will tattoo over it and do something meaningful and transformational, or someone who used to self-harm will tattoo over it, and that's super powerful. And so what is the particular motivation for you to offer the class together?

RW: I think we love working together-we approach things in different ways and so when you mix it all up together, we've found the classes to be really really enjoyable. Because it seems like we're offering a class about tattoos, which we are, but we're really offering a class that allows people to tell their stories-and there are people that come to the class that don't have tattoos, but they say things like, if I were to get one it would be this because this symbol has followed me throughout my life. That's part of what the class is-everyone thinking about what symbols and images make them able to be themselves, and in the fullest way possible.

KB: Yes, another thing that we have come across a lot less often-but is still important-is the removal of a tattoo. And that can have a lot of emotion attached with it-it's like an undoing of something that was seen as perhaps detrimental, or, too much grief associated with it, so that the only way to move forward is to remove this memory of the event rather than to tattoo over it.

ZT: And so is that a frequent occurrence-where someone will look at an image and it will almost be traumatic?

KB: We haven't seen it a whole lot. We did have a woman who shared in the last seminar who was very emotional, and from a personal standpoint.

ZT: Have you ever seen someone else's tattoo or body art, and had an image or symbol resonate with you personally?

KB: Yes, and also the quality of the tattoo-but yes, I know of one tattoo where a woman is holding a lantern, and that was very powerful for me. And I told the person that too, at the time. There are all kinds of natural images, images of plants and animals that are beguiling-one man had a bat that was very provocative to me, very meaningful-I had never even thought of the bat as a symbol, and it led me to write a poem about a bat because I was so affected by it. So yes, we do get affected, and some of the stories also are more personally

affective to me than others.

RW: Definitely, and I think so much of this project that has opened our eyes is that it's just another way of people talking about what's important to them, the milestones, the really important things in their journey. So when I see someone with a really interesting tattoo, I may or may not be in a position to ask about it. But I think, what is that person's whole psychological journey that that led to getting that tattoo? What does it mean to them now, and even if it's not particularly conscious for them, thinking of it from a Jungian point of view, what are all but the unconscious layers that also led to that decision?

ZT: That's super fascinating because it seems to imply that the desire to embody images and to have them permanently tattooed on your body is associated with trauma and very intense, provocative events. And so would you say that people in general who have been through more difficult life circumstances are more likely to get tattoos?

KB: That's a difficult question because the act of getting tattoos is a symbol of the identity for many millennials. So, difficult life circumstances-I mean, that's such a subjective thing. One person will think of how difficult something is, and the next person will think, that's a piece of cake but what I experienced was-so yes, it is accepted and enjoyed, and it flourishes as not only a scarification of the skin-it flourishes as an art form at this point in our culture-and as a symbol of sacrifice. And traditionally, that's what a tattoo was used as-a scarification used in sacrifices in the ritual of initiation. I think it is, on a more collective level, a real urge toward a need to experience something that initiates young people into themselves, into their own identity.

RW: And I think another aspect of this-one whole category of tattoos are those of grouphood-to belong, like a military tattoo, a school, or all kinds of different groups that one belongs to-and then in a larger sense, a group of people who have tattoos or do not have tattoos. Because once there's sort of an understanding of the cost involved, the pain involved, to say that this is something that I decided to do with my body-not just what someone else or something that just happened to me-it's something that expresses me. And so that creates a whole other group and way of expressing.

ZT: And so it could be motivated by very intense positive experiences as much as negative ones.

RW: Definitely-so often, real celebratory tattoos-it's not always the difficult negative experiences and traumas sometimes, they do it as a way of celebration. And I think that's one really wonderful thing, that the artistry has risen to such an incredible extent, and the colors and the subtlety that a really great tattoo artist can achieve is a real celebration of art, and of life, and of individual expression and freedom.

ZT: So do you see a sort of celebratory expression a little more among millennials? So, I'm twenty years old and I'm a college student, and it seems like the taboo surrounding tattoos has largely disappeared from generation to generation.

RW: Right-I think it is very, very different to get a tattoo now than it was twenty, twenty-five years ago-certainly fifty years ago it was considered a very special group of people who got tattoos, and now that's very different. But I think that just means more possibilities, or possibilities for expression and more possibilities for artistry.

KB: Yes, I think the art form has really naturalized it has really become much more precise-much more complicated, much more precise.