

In the Footsteps

The Story of an Initiatory Drawing by Dr. Joseph Henderson

Thomas Singer

This chapter tells the story about a drawing – about its creation and its meaning to the man who drew it, Dr Joseph Henderson. The narrative unfolds on many different levels simultaneously. A few of the levels that the reader may want to keep in mind about this remarkable drawing and its even more remarkable creator are:

1. This is the story of a young man’s search for meaning, orientation, and even the renewal and transformation of his life at a critical moment in his development.
2. This is the story of the making of a special kind of drawing – a drawing based largely on the inner reality of the psyche rather than the outer circumstances of a life – although the outer circumstances are essential to the inner events.
3. The “language” of the drawing comes from the world of dreams, of the imagination, of myth, and it is expressed symbolically. The drawing itself tells a story just as there is a story behind the making of the drawing.
4. This is a story that takes place at a particularly “ripe” time both in modern history and in the early development of the Jungian tradition – just between the two world wars and at the peak of the Great Depression – 1930 and 1931.

The telling of this story best begins with a recounting of how the drawing first came to my attention – just about seventy-five years after it was drawn. As part of celebrating Dr. Henderson’s one hundredth birthday in 2003, a fund honoring

his remarkable career and life was established. A committee was formed to decide the most fitting way to use the fund's generous contributions and it became clear that republishing *Thresholds of Initiation* – Dr. Henderson's seminal book – was the perfect tribute. About the republication, I wrote in the Foreword at the time:

For many, *Thresholds of Initiation* became the **landmark**, the **talisman**, and the **model** for both analysis and for analytic training at the C.G. Jung Institute in San Francisco. Based on Dr. Henderson's work, the process of analysis was often framed in terms of the archetype of initiation. The book *Thresholds of Initiation* became a "threshold of initiation" on which both analysis and the analytic training program were patterned – not in the sense of prescribing a course of treatment or in designing a curriculum but in establishing an underlying purpose, value and meaning to the analytic endeavor.

(Henderson 2005: xiv–xv, original emphases)

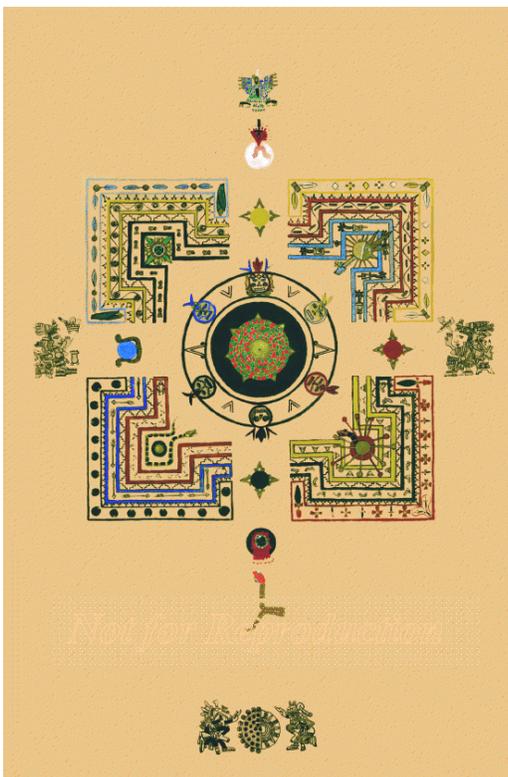


Figure 1 A drawing by Joseph Henderson.

Shortly after writing that description, I received an email from Dyane Sherwood, the committee member who first suggested creating a fund in honor of Dr. Henderson's birthday and one of the contributors to this book. Her message contained a PDF image of a drawing that Dr. Henderson had made in 1931 (Figure 1). Dyane thought the drawing might make a good cover for the reissue of *Thresholds of Initiation*. When I opened the computer file, I was dazzled. Something inside me literally vibrated in

response to the image on the screen. I don't know if anyone has made a study of

the phenomena of “PDF files and the numinous” or “emails and the archetype of initiation” – but, based on my experience of seeing Dr. Henderson’s 1931 drawing on the screen for the first time in 2003, I can testify to the fact that the numinous and the archetype of initiation can be experienced in cyber space.

Although I had seen the drawing on the wall in Dr. Henderson’s home office before, I had not really taken note of it. Suddenly – in Dyane’s email – it came to glowing life on my screen. It seemed so fresh and full of energy – even brand new – although it had been drawn three-quarters of a century before. It spoke directly to my soul – as if I had known it all my life. I became an ardent advocate for this image to become the cover of the new edition of *Thresholds of Initiation*. Ultimately, Dr. Henderson made the decision in favor of another image, which represented to him a coming to fruition of his initiatory journey, whereas the image of this chapter was more at the beginning.

Dr. Henderson and I began a year-long discussion about the drawing of this study which I jokingly referred to as “the cover not chosen” – the subject of this chapter. Those talks in themselves became a journey between Dr. Henderson and myself. As the chapters in this book demonstrate, many have followed in the footsteps of Dr. Henderson – in their unique ways. This chapter tracks Dr. Henderson’s own footsteps in his reminiscences of this drawing, leading us back to the origins of his experience with the archetype of initiation.

Joe Henderson was born in 1903. He was 27 years old when he drew this image in 1931. It would be another thirty-six years before the material of his own personal experience would ripen into his professional account of the archetype of initiation, *Thresholds of Initiation*, first published in 1967. He would begin telling

me the story of the making of the drawing in 2004, in his one hundredth and first year. This image, then, is a living symbolic bridge between Dr. Henderson's own initiatory journey in the early 1930s, his clinical portrait of the archetype of initiation in *Thresholds of Initiation* in 1967, and the writing of this chapter in 2006. Over the years, Dr. Henderson has shared many parts of this story with others, although this is perhaps the first time a narrative has been put together as a coherent story about this drawing which laid down the footsteps for one man whom so many came to love and to follow. Of course, there was no real following in Dr. Henderson's footsteps and none of the authors of this volume would either claim to be able to or want to follow too closely in his tracks because our tradition is fundamentally about finding one's own way. Still, we are all interested in Dr. Henderson's footsteps.

The centerpiece of the story is an image that might best be thought of as a psycho-spiritual map that anticipates and guides the archetypal initiatory journey of Joseph Henderson – a kind of inner compass. It is not easy to stay oriented to person, place and time – the stuff of ordinary linear development and narrative – while simultaneously tracking an inner life in its archetypal unfolding. It is not easy to remain oriented in multiple dimensions simultaneously. In telling the story of this drawing, we are tracking biography, psychology, symbology, iconography – all in the context of the archetype of initiation as it unfolds in the life of an individual. Teasing these layers out and interweaving them has been the “ripening fruit” of my conversations with Dr. Henderson. Every time I thought I had developed some sense of where we were in the narrative of the drawing – or thought I knew what a particular part of the picture was about – Joe would

surprise me with new information that added incredible richness and texture to the story. For instance, at one point, Dr. Henderson told me additional details about the upper right quadrant (which I will discuss later) and I remarked to him in some amazement, “I never knew that.” He replied simply, “How could you? I never told you about it before.” The image became richer and richer. The story is told mostly in Dr. Henderson’s own words and the interpretations of the drawing are exclusively his. It was not my role to interpret his drawing; my role was simply to ask questions.

Here is some context and basic chronology. Dr. Henderson traveled from America to Zurich in the fall of 1929 to study and to analyze with Jung. He remained in Zurich until June of 1930. He settled in London to begin his premedical studies in the fall of 1930 which continued through the academic year into 1931. As he was completing these studies in the spring of 1931, Joe had two big dreams on consecutive nights in the midst of his premed course exams:

The dreams made me think I needed an analytic hour or two to talk to Jung. I booked travel to Zurich as soon as I could, and I went to see Jung in the early summer of 1931. Jung was not very helpful. All he said was that he was leaving in a day or so for summer vacation.

Jung was not there for Joe when he needed him.

I went to Zurich because I was in trouble. I needed to talk to Jung about myself. I needed someone. So, I decided to interpret the dreams myself and do this drawing – which took about three weeks. At stake was whether or not to go to medical school.

Joe never talked to Jung about the details of this drawing, but – at the age of 101 – Joe said, “I activated the archetype of initiation within myself and realized that I could interpret my own dreams.”

Here are the two dreams that Joe had in the spring of 1931. These two dreams find abstract, symbolic expression in the top and near the bottom of the drawing. (The rest of this chapter will isolate parts of the drawing with close-up images, each of which tells a separate



Figure 2

part of the story. To see these parts in relation to the whole, please refer back to Figure 1.)

A white horse (white circle in Figure 2) is running along the surface of a gray sea. An eagle flies down from the sky and bites the horse in the back of the neck where there is an exposed artery. Blood spurts up from the pierced artery and the horse dies. I awoke and knew that I was going to fail my premed course exams on the following day.

Even as we look at the image of the dream, as it appears in the top of the drawing today, the spurting blood seems fresh – as if it just happened this instant – which underlines the timelessness of archetypal reality. To some, the outer events and circumstances of Joe’s life at the time of this dream might not suggest an “ordeal,” but to those who know the reality of the inner world, this dream and its symbolic representation in the drawing convey grave danger and the onset of an ordeal.

Dream Two is represented in the drawing near the bottom and is shown in

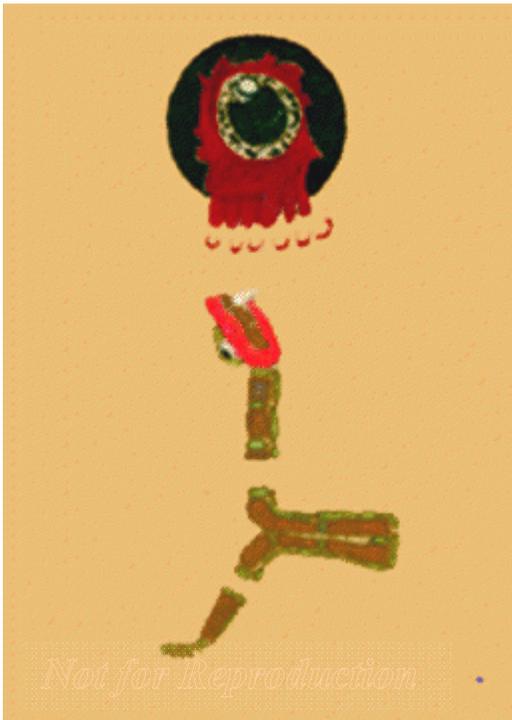


Figure 3

detail in Figure 3.

The dream of the following night is set in the depths of the ocean. A snake with a red head comes up from below – from the depths – and bites a flat, black fish. The snake bites the fish in exactly the same way that the eagle bit the horse on the back of the neck the night before.

Joe elaborated on the meaning of the dreams over time in the following way:

The dreams seemed very complicated to me. The “eagle” bite (Figure 1.2, Dream One) was a “bad one” – a killer. It said to me that I was going to fail my examination on the next day. The red headed snake bite of the second night (Figure 1.3, Dream Two) suggested a renewal of life – life giving rather

than death dealing. That surprised me and suggested that I was going to pass the examination somehow, but I didn’t know how. The dreams seemed to be two pairs of opposites and I knew I had something to work on:

- There was the snake coming up from below, biting the fish.
- And there was the eagle coming down from above, biting the horse.

The pair of opposites above was matched by a pair of opposites from below. It presented to my eye a double vision, or two pairs of pairs.

While Jung was away on vacation, I told the dreams to one or two women. One woman especially reacted to it – Linda Fierz David who wrote a book about women’s initiation in Pompeii (Fierz David 1988). She said that the dreams were “interesting” and she saw me as dreading the whole process of becoming a doctor.

In that sense, the eagle was the medical profession itself. I was putting myself through something that was a trial of strength. The white horse symbolized my natural enjoyment of life and my not wanting to inhibit it. The serpent with the red head symbolized life energies coming from below and bringing new life. The flat fish lying on

the bottom of the sea was like inertia itself, just heavy and unable to move. So there was a threat from above and a bite from below.

In medical school my body was heavy, like the fish on the bottom of the sea. I had to kill my inertia and the wish to remain a white horse instead of a red snake. I had to give up my passive identification with heroic youth (white horse). Both the inertia (the flat fish) and the passive identification with the heroic phase of life and its enjoyment (the white horse) needed to die. Linda Fierz pointed out that the white horse carried natural instinct and the enjoyment of life – it needed to “die.”

In a way, all of the animals in the dreams were ambivalent. For instance, the black eagle of the first dream became – in subsequent dreams – blue and white rather than black and white. I saw that as more “favorable.”

The drawing that I made from these two pairs of opposites (the two pairs of animals) became dynamic. It’s complicated, but its complication is what makes it interesting. I came to think that the bite of the eagle showed my fear of failing – that’s why it was so negative to me. Not just failing the examination, but failing at the whole process of becoming a physician. I was afraid that I would be unable to go through with a medical career.

The first dream said that I was convinced I had failed. The second dream suggested that there could be a positive meaning to this failure. The snake dream was hopeful to me, that I might still be able to proceed. The hope for renewal really came from the snake bite from below.

I also told the dreams to my great friend Cary Baynes. Cary wouldn’t interpret the dreams at all, but she would listen to me “informally.” She made me get an appointment with Jung when he returned at the end of the summer, after I had completed painting the image. We went to Bollingen and had supper with Jung. After supper, I showed him my painting. Jung said that it showed I had “unusual decorative ability.” He also said that the left side or the feminine side was more finished and the right side, the masculine side, was less finished and I should get to work on my masculine side. He saw the right side as ‘breaking up’ with different images. He didn’t comment on the central area. I had already interpreted it to my own satisfaction.

Let’s take a closer look at the iconography of the drawing as elaborated by Joe, keeping in mind that this is an interior story. The initiatory ordeal portrayed in this drawing is happening in the psyche – not outside in the world.

The symbolic rendering of the two dreams at the top and bottom of the drawing that Dr. Henderson has already described in his own words can be seen as both stating the precipitating inner problem at the archetypal level and as framing the drawing.

At the very center of the drawing is a gold circle of “peaceful resolve.” It is surrounded by pieces of blue turquoise and red coral (Figure 4).

This inner core was the first thing that Joe painted after going to an art supply store in Zurich and carefully picking out a piece of



Figure 4

parchment on which he could work comfortably. He started drawing in the center using gold, coral, and turquoise. Joe told me that drawing the center first “put it all in motion.” Just beyond this core of brilliant light that “centers” the drawing is an area of intense black about which Joe said the following:

This is the black obsidian mirror of Tezcatlipoca. I was very taken up with Mayan and Aztec art and archeology when I was drawing this. It is said that if you look into this mirror, you can see your essential Self.

About this god, I found the following:

Tezcatlipoca was the Aztec god of war. He carried a magic mirror that gave off smoke and killed enemies, and so he was called “god of smoking mirror. Whoever would gaze into it this black mirror of obsidian might perceive the meaning of his soul.”¹

Joe said to me: “Looking into the black obsidian mirror symbolizes the ability to focus on the inner life.”

Directly encircling the black mirror is a series of masks, some of which brought to my mind Donald Kalsched’s archetypal defenses of the personal spirit. But, Joe noted particularly the one at the top: a “hermaphroditic” figure with feathers in the hair representing the “fullness of life” and the one opposite to it at

the bottom, a skull figure that represents “death.”

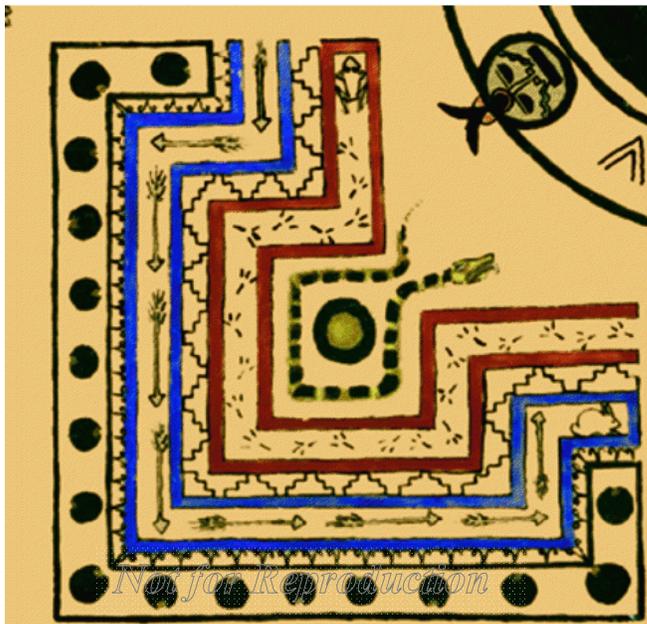


Figure 5

Beyond the golden, turquoise, and coral core, and beyond the black obsidian mirror and then beyond the encircling ring of ritual masks, the central drama of this initiatory tale is played out in a progression of four panels that move from the lower left quadrant, to the lower

right quadrant, to the upper right quadrant, to the upper left quadrant. These four panels tell the story of the snake’s journey and/or of the transformation of the psyche’s libido.

One can think of what happens to the snake in these four panels as being a picture of a transformative process along the instinctual-spiritual poles of the psyche. Joe never told me if he considered himself a member of a snake clan – but the esoteric narrative of this drawing is told through the snake’s development. The snake at the lower left is, as Joe said, “OK with itself – at rest” (Figure 5).

Joe said, “Its movement hasn’t happened yet in reality, but it signifies the beginning of the initiatory process of snake undergoing a whole new cycle of transformation.” The ordeal – begun by the white horse being killed by the eagle above and the renewing serpent with



Figure 6

the red head emerging from below to kill the flat, black fish – hasn’t yet mobilized the snake at the bottom left. But, Joe went on to describe the snake at the bottom right as “manic, chaotic, agitated” (Figure 6).

Joe explained, “He’s really being worked over!! He’s in motion (the red balls) and he may be suffering.” The snake’s ordeal has begun. The snake in the upper right quadrant comes up and, according to Joe, “Out of itself into a new spiritual place and takes on the form of a plumed serpent” (Figure 7).

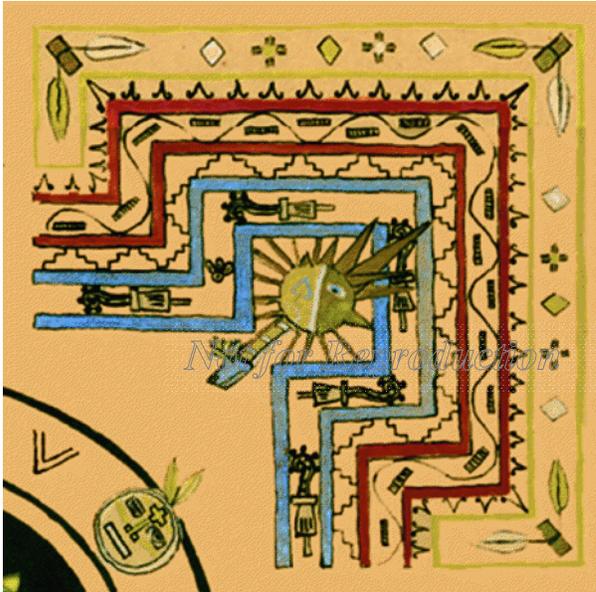


Figure 7

I asked Joe if the plumed serpent of the upper right hand quadrant was a coming together of the feathers from the eagle of his first dream (at the top of the drawing) with the red headed snake of his second dream (at the bottom of the drawing) – and that out of this coming together of feather from above and snake from below there

emerged the figure of the “plumed serpent.” Joe agreed with this as a possible origin of the plumed serpent, but said that putting the feathers of the eagle together with the serpent biting the fish to make the plumed serpent was not something he thought about consciously when he made this drawing. Joe said that the upper left hand quadrant showed the resolution of the initiatory ordeal in a mandala that takes the form of a plant (Figure 8).

In another telling of the story of the snake’s transformation (the time when Joe told me a piece of the story I had never heard before because he had never told it to me before), Joe talked more about the symbolism of the upper right hand quadrant (Figure 7).



Figure 8

The additional story about how this part of the drawing developed reveals how deeply interwoven in the initiatory process can be the role of dream, of active imagination, of outer life circumstances, and inner psychological development. Looking closely at this part of the drawing, one sees that the plumed serpent emerges out of a sun that is divided into two. This imagery comes from another dream that Joe had during the period that the drawing was taking shape. The dream itself had been further elaborated in an active imagination that Joe had about it.

I saw myself dead in a dream. There was a sarcophagus with a statue of me on its cover. As I looked at the sarcophagus, I began to come to life. Then, I saw a priestly figure with a staff in his hand – on top of the staff was a sun symbol divided into two halves. It meant that I was going to come to life instead of remaining a corpse in the sarcophagus.

Joe continued his explanation of how the drawing formed itself: “The plumed serpent coming out of the divided sun in the drawing is an imaginative elaboration of the divided sun dream.”

In creating the progression of panels to tell the story of snake’s transformation, Joe decided that he wanted the drawing to have a “counterclockwise movement” (see Figure 1). He said to me, “The whole drawing begins and ends in the center, but its narrative moves counterclockwise.” This was a conscious and contrarian decision by Joe. Jung and others had observed that conventional mandala movement, such as those in stained glass windows, emphasizes clockwise movement. Joe’s dilemma was how to get it “to turn around and to rotate, but in a different way from the mandalas that others around him – including Jung – were drawing and studying.” He didn’t want his drawing to look like a replica of works by others who were presumably following

Jung's lead. Henderson knew that Hitler's swastika also goes counterclockwise which gives it an aspect of witchcraft that invokes a magical dimension.

In addition to the counterclockwise movement of the snake's development, there is another feature that gives Joe's drawing a dynamic quality. Joe decided to leave the entrances to the center more open – thinking of them as “open windows, in direct contrast to the formal gateways of the Tibetan mandala which guard the entrance to the center.” Joe wanted to leave “a way for all the major symbols to move freely in and out instead of their being closed in.” Joe said this was a message to himself that said, “Look inside, but don't avoid looking outside as well.”

Perhaps it was the counterclockwise movement and the “open windows” that led Toni Wolff to take note of Joe's drawing hanging on the wall when, a few years later, she visited his apartment in London. Wolf was accompanying Jung on his October 1935 trip to England on which occasion Jung delivered the Tavistock lectures. She said that Joe's drawing “was unlike any other mandala she had seen.” Wolff found the other Jungian mandalas “too geometric, too regular – they had their own design – but didn't say anything beyond that.” She liked the dynamic openness and asymmetry of Joe's drawing and that is what has excited me as well.

Looking closely at the drawing, there are many other details that one can focus on. Every element has meaning and one is meant to travel around the picture participating in a symbolic journey that orients, transforms and initiates. However, there is insufficient space to discuss every detail of this intricate and elaborate symbolic image. But I do want to highlight one additional comment by

Joe about the “sacrificial knife” in the lower right hand quadrant (see lower left portion of Figure 6).

“What had to be sacrificed?” I asked Joe. At the age of 101, he replied: “The tendency to identify with the Self as if it were my experience.” On another occasion, he said that his “inertia” (the flat fish at the bottom of the sea) needed to be sacrificed, as did his identification with the “white horse,” a kind of identification with the “hero” and with a life of pleasure. Or “sacrificing inertia can be another way of saying that the ego’s identification with the Self needs to be sacrificed.” Finally, at the age of 101, he said: “It is an ongoing experience.”

Without much help from Jung on the occasion of his urgent visit to Zurich, Joe returned to London at the end of the summer of 1931 – renewed and initiated from within. He was permitted to retake the premed exams in Botany and Physics which, as his dream predicted, he had in fact failed. He was not required to take all the courses over again. He passed the exams and entered medical school at St Bartholomew’s in the fall of 1931.

Part of the architecture of initiation that Joe was to later sketch in *Thresholds of Initiation* was what he in fact experienced personally in returning to London and entering medical school. An essential aspect of the archetype of initiation is to rejoin the world in a new way as a natural expression of the initiatory experience – to get, as Joe put it, “more connected to life and the social order.” Joe found himself developing an outer relatedness which was particularly difficult for someone as naturally introverted as he had always been. Of this, Joe said:

I was beginning to know what it is to be socially minded – to read the newspaper. I had not been at all interested in politics or anything related to it. As I began to get into the medical world, I thought I should join the human race and be more socially minded. Part of my initiation was to develop a social attitude – to join the world. All of the people around Barts hospital and Cambridge were extremely liberal . . . I dutifully read the New Statesman and the Nation every week because everybody I knew did that. The study of Medicine and becoming a doctor was an initiatory experience.

Henderson’s “joining the human race” can be seen as an outer manifestation of the “open windows” in his drawing – the ability to move more freely in and out of the inner world. This attitude resulted in a new readiness to take an interest in some of the great traditions of the political, social, and scientific world of his day:

1. He felt a political connection to the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt through his Uncle Charlie’s presence in Washington, DC as a Senator from Nevada and as a leader of the Finance Reconstruction Corporation.
2. He participated in an illustrious social and scientific tradition in England through his relationship to his future wife, Helena, and the Darwin family of which she was a member.
3. He joined one of the oldest and finest medical traditions in the world by studying at St Bartholomew’s which dates back to the eleventh century and could claim William Harvey – the discoverer of the blood circulatory system – as one of its own.

The drawing was a wonderful initiatory link between my premedical world and my plunging into medical school. As in the drawing, medical school brought me into the presence of death and its opposite, rebirth. Initiation in medical school brought about both the feeling of being small and insignificant and of being large and part of an important world. I felt very small and yet part of a big tradition. Of course, those feelings of being big and small go along with the archetype of initiation because there is the

experience of one's personal "puniness" in the presence of something big, important and meaningful. One is very small and IT is very important.

It is with a final reflection on the dynamic between "small/big" that I want to bring this narrative of Dr. Henderson's drawing to a close. (Much of the drawing, by the way, is very small while the overall impact is very big.) During the year of interviewing Joe and listening to the many stories associated with the time around the making of his drawing, there were pregnant silences between us in which no words were exchanged.

On occasion, I found myself gazing out the window of his office pavilion at the clouds passing overhead with a heightened awareness of the fact that they have been coursing the sky long before human consciousness of them. Observing the low hanging, swift moving clouds in the shared silence with Joe filled me with wonder at the fleeting miracle of life on this planet – and wonder at the puniness of our everyday lives and concerns in the face of timeless mysteries – such as the mystery of initiation.

Learning – over and over again – about the right proportions between small and big;

Learning about a healthy tension between this "smallness and bigness"

in the psyche,

in the social order,

in the natural order,

and in the spiritual realm;

This Learning is at the heart of the ongoing experience of the archetype of initiation and its mystery of death and rebirth about which Dr. Henderson has taught so many so much.

Finally, if you look carefully, you will see his “footsteps” in the drawing.

Note

1. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tezcatlipoca>

References

Fierz David, Linda (1988) *Women’s Dionysian Initiation: The Villa of Mysteries in Pompeii*, Jungian Classics Series 11, Dallas, TX: Spring.

Henderson, Joseph L. (2005) *Thresholds of Initiation*, 2nd edition, Wilmette, IL: Chiron.