

Creative Healing Methods in the Sufi Alchemical Retreat

A dialogue between Retreat Guide and Retreatant

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Saphira Linden, Retreat Guide

Hayra Prull, Retreatant

Beyond the dreams and fantasies of our conscious mind, the stage is set for the play of shadows.

What we discover, which is very potent, is that often by uncovering the nemesis of shadow, underneath this challenging character is the seat of awareness and power that has not been expressed.

Introduction: Saphira Linden recently guided Hayra Prull on retreat. What emerged from their experience together was a new retreat format. This format incorporates contemporary psychological theory, art therapies and dream work into the classical alchemical retreat.

Hayra: Saphira, could you share what your experience is as a retreat guide and a therapist?

Saphira: I've been in the Sufi Order for 26 years and early on was a Representative and Guide and had the experience of developing theatrical pageants as spiritual practices with Pir Vilayat. THE COSMIC MASS which became THE COSMIC CELEBRATION evolved over a 13-year period. This pageant portrayed dramatic enactments of prophets, angelic beings, people in life who portrayed the different stages of transformation based on the inner meaning of the different stages of the Catholic Mass. This was translated into all religions and the parallel transformational journeys of the great prophets were dramatized. This inspiration of Pir Vilayat was left it to me to translate into a script and a theatrical form.

How to bring these characters to life in an authentic way? We held them as inner concentrations for a long time through meditation practices. I already had a fair amount of experience translating conceptual matters into theatrical forms through my theatrical background. This spiritual work led me to become a professional transpersonal drama therapist; hence my interest in integrating meditation and spiritual experience into traditional therapeutic modalities.

H: Tell us about your experience with Sufi retreats.

S: The Sufi alchemical retreat process and my professional theatre/therapeutic work have always influenced each other. In the '70's Pir Vilayat developed the alchemical retreat process. The first three stages were designed with Hindu and Buddhist practices to take people into a place that was very much out of our bodies and into a kind of unity consciousness. Then the next three stages, based on Jewish, Christian and Islamic practices, were designed to bring one back into the world, back into life with a

different perspective. I remember taking a 21-day retreat in which I was guided by Pir Vilayat in the Alps, and that was very powerful.

One of the things I was doing even back then in the '70's was writing down dreams. There was a dream in particular that was very important for me. This dream was telling me something about what I was going through, and very important to deal with. However, I didn't deal with it during the retreat as I was instructed to go into Samadhi.

That was a very pivotal experience for me. Psychological levels were surfacing which needed to be dealt with in my process. And so I did that in other ways, later. This personal experience motivated me to begin to integrate psychological depth work with our classical meditation practices.

Hayra, why don't you say something about your background and what brought you to request this kind of retreat?

H: I've been in the Sufi Order for 20 years. I am a Retreat Guide and a Representative. I knew I wanted to do a very long and very intensive retreat. At the same time, I knew too that I was not about to leave my children for a month. And so, we had to create a new way of doing this.

S: And I believe that mothers really need to be supported in their mothering. We need to help them do retreats, while balancing their parenting responsibilities.

H: I certainly agree. A few years ago I tried to do a 21-day retreat. I got as far as 17 days and found the bottom line for me was I had to quit because I just missed my children too much. There had to be another way of working things out and as it turns out, we discovered one. How is the kind retreat that we did together different from traditional alchemical Sufi retreat process as introduced by Pir Vilayat?

S: It's my feeling that every retreat guide, just like every therapist, brings to their practice what they know how to do best and what they're guided to do in the moment. You came to me with some very specific needs and goals. So why don't you tell us what your hope was for this retreat.

H: At the time I was suffering from a clinical depression. I was having panic attacks. My husband was very, very close to moving out of the house. A 13-year marriage was going down the tubes and I felt like my whole life was a mess. I sensed the way to get through this was to get away from everything.

I work in the office at the Abode of The Message and by definition I'm in the middle of everything. I needed to sink into the retreat process and let the retreat do what it was going to do because I was completely overwhelmed. The goal was to find out what it was in myself that was creating all this pain. The only way to do that was to go within and really work on those causes.

S: Because you had taken so many retreats and had been in a lot of therapeutic processes and there were issues that you still hadn't gotten to, it became necessary to use whatever tools I had from my different trainings and experience (mostly intuition) to help you get to that. I thought about tuning in and doing what I could, trying all the while to stay in tune with Murshid and other internal guides.

H: That's why you made the perfect retreat guide because you have the skills as a therapist and your guidance provided a very nice container. It's a good thing you didn't have any concepts about what was tradition because we did the whole thing by phone and that's also very non-traditional.

S: Right. I had refused to do that at first because I didn't think it was possible to do this kind of work by phone, but I was wrong. After you had asking me several times

and I said no, I finally realized you knew what you needed and I needed to trust that. I was astounded at how well it worked. So that just taught me that it's not about being on the phone or being in person; it's about tuning to each other...

H: ...whether you're in Boston and I'm in New Lebanon

S: Right. I did come to see you at one point in the middle because I wanted to test out to see whether I would get the same thing if I saw you in person. I discovered it was the same. So that was a great confirmation that it was working despite the initial distance. I certainly would recommend people doing it in person if they can, because I think there are things you can get by body language. But I felt you very present every time we talked in the morning and something happened in my consciousness where I really felt I was seeing you in person.

One of the modalities that I've been working with a lot in the last decade, but hadn't quite used in this way through retreats, is the work in dreams.

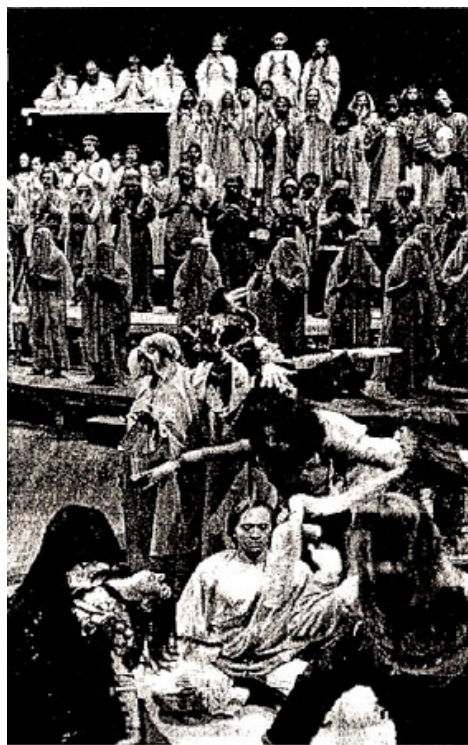
H: Which leads me to the question, what is the role of dreams in this type of retreat and how does that role differ in more traditional retreats?

S: Let's just say that I feel pretty conversant with dreams in my therapeutic process and it wasn't totally new to me to work with dreams on retreats as they have often come up with people during their retreat process. But I had never tried to use them as intensely as we did in this retreat. I suggested you try to remember one or two dreams every night. I didn't know and you didn't know if that was even possible. You were able to remember one or two dreams every night, like clock work, for 28 days. I found that enormously helpful because dreams come from the individuals themselves; they tell me what's going on in their psyches, what is asking to be dealt with. They give me a clue about pace and about what you're actually ready to deal with.

So the dreams became a guiding light. We integrated the traditional Sufi practices with the processing of the dreams— writing, drawing and other expressive arts to get at what the dreams reinforced and at the next stage, what your psyche was trying to uncover and work with. In regards to some of your deepest issues it was quite wonderful to have the dreams guide us how to best work in the context of this sacred chalice, the retreat.

Within the context of Dhikr you are helped to remember that God is the only reality. This helps when you're going through a very difficult emotional experience. But it's not surprising that challenging life material which comes up is really crying to be paid attention to and be dealt with.

I feel that one of the problems with the traditional retreat process is that things come up in Dhikr, like sexual abuse or violence memories—memories the psyche represses. But these repressed memories can create panic attacks because they work on you inside and there is no place for them to surface. Retreats can surface them but then



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they must be dealt with so that those energies and feelings can be honored before they are truly transformed. Otherwise, as I remember in guiding earlier retreats, they just get stuffed back into the psyche and one has to start all over again at another time in order to heal.

H: What amazed me during this process was that I learned there is no such thing as a nonsense dream. Every single dream has incredible significance. Left to my own devices, I never would have figured out the significance of these dream images. But you encouraged me to dig through the symbolism and find what my unconscious was really telling me. Every dream turned out to be pretty profound actually, even the ones that seemed silly on the surface.

S: The dreams also refer to some part of oneself that is asking to be heard. Dreams are very powerful tools.

Working with arts modalities can also be powerful. For instance, one could be directed to the consciousness of Murshid, or other masters, saints or prophets, or of any great for that matter with whom one feels very closely attuned in one's spiritual life. To think about what that being would tell you is a good exercise, but to become that being as you imagine him or her can be much more effective. It allows you to get in touch with that part of yourself. Also entering the consciousness of the person that you're still most in conflict with, such as perpetrators and parental figures, allows you to explore those issues that are unresolved. It helps you to get a perspective from that person's point of view. That can be enormously helpful in the healing process.

H: I would say the whole crux of the retreat revolved around Dhikr and the practice of Ya Batin/ Ya Zahir. That practice was very important for me and probably it was this practice that helped me to remember all those dreams in the first place.

S: Yes. Ya Batin is that which is hidden and Ya Zahir is the manifest. You can't manifest something until you bring to the surface that which is hidden.

As Pir Vilayat said when somebody asked him what THE COSMIC CELEBRATION was about after a 13-year evolution, "What's the purpose of THE COSMIC CELEBRATION if you had to sum it up?" For those who aren't familiar with THE COSMIC CELEBRATION, it's like summarizing the history of religion, the transformation process of all the prophets, the celestial planes of the Kabbalah. Pir simply said that it's about making the unconscious, conscious. What I believe he meant by that was to make conscious our divine inheritance.

S: The first line of THE COSMIC CELEBRATION narration read, "Beyond the dreams and fantasies of our conscious mind, the stage is set for the play of shadows." Now we know that in Jungian psychology, shadow means hidden. And he was using "the play of shadows" in order to have the audience try to grasp what our divine inheritance is. But we also know that shadow represents whatever is hidden; those Divine attributes of ours that we haven't owned but also a lot of unresolved issues and conflicts that are still in our being that have not surfaced. Sometimes shadow refers to memories of trauma and abuse that we have repressed.

Also, I've discovered in working with people that "if you don't face your shadow," as Jung said, "it will return to you in the form of your fate. If it stays repressed and hidden, it will play out in unconscious ways that can be very destructive to you and to other people.

H: Yes, that was a powerful learning experience for me, learning to access what was underneath the surface of my consciousness and that is what really made the retreat work.

S: We entered this retreat very much in an attempt to work with healing as you had requested and in that process we had to get to some very deep things. Why don't you say a little bit about what you were dealing with from early on, in your family system?

H: My father was an untreated raging alcoholic; he was extremely violent. While I did not get the brunt of his anger directly, I certainly witnessed enough of it with regular beatings of my mother and my brother. We had to lock our doors on a nightly basis to get away from him and his violence. One night, when I was nine, he pounded down a solid oak door with his fists in order to gain access to my room. I experienced an emotional white out. It was actually being too frightened to feel fear. And certainly underneath the fear is all that anger and that sense of invasion. I remembered exactly what happened but I just didn't feel anything about it at all and that's called dissociation. Intellectually, I knew this was at the root of the depression and the panic attacks and the somatization I was experiencing. I was also diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1982 and while it has been fairly benign in my particular case, there were still issues around that with which I had to deal as well. So that's the background from which I came and what I offered to you, Saphira, to help me heal.

S: So we called on our Silsila, all the Masters, Saints and Prophets of our lineage, especially Murshid and Pir Vilayat, but we also called on some of the ancient goddesses so that the feminine came into the healing process as well. Thus we created the sacred container for the retreat process.

H: I should also mention, Saphira, that beforehand my view of the feminine was not terribly well informed. I thought it was tantamount to bra burning and I did not see the point. I have always been very male oriented in terms of my devotion. Not that I saw God as a man necessarily but the Masters, Saints and Prophets that I would attune to most easily were male. Maybe you can say something about why that perspective is a little skewed.

S: Well, I also probably was more developed in my inner masculine in my earlier adult life. But as I understand these principles now, every human being, male and female, has an inner masculine and an inner feminine—in Jungian terms, the anima and animus; in Murshid's terms, Jamal and Jelal. In order to come to wholeness and balance, everyone has to balance those parts of themselves. The Chrysalis Connection, the Feminine Council of the Sufi Order that I helped to found, was based on questionnaires that Taj sent out to all the women in the Sufi Order. She inquired about needs that weren't being met as women in terms of female role models, practices, gender—inclusive language, and honoring the ancient traditions of the Great Mother, which were many and really precursors to all of the other religions. After all, one of the etymological roots of Sufism is "Sophia," the wisdom and often called the feminine wisdom underneath all religion. So we need to honor all of that and we need to first honor it in ourselves.

I know that as a woman doing theatre in a male—dominated profession, I did it well. But in doing my work I also had developed the inner male part of me more than my inner feminine. The more receptive side of my nature, my need to be still and more inner was less valued and therefore less realized. In developing that aspect of my being more than a decade ago, I immersed myself in the feminine mysteries. It just became clear to me that this all needs to be understood a little more. After all, Murshid said, "It's women who will take us to our next stage of evolution." I'm not sure if he didn't mean our "inner feminine" will take us there, for men and women. It was honoring how important it is for this aspect to really be tapped into for the next stage of evolution.

H: For people who are not up on what you mean by inner masculine and inner feminine, could you say something about that?

S: Yes. Basically in Sufism we have our Jemali and Jelali sides. Jemali is our receptive side or the inner feminine. Jelali is our masculine or expressive side, and all the different qualities that go with that. We all need to balance those two aspects of who we are. As Marion Woodman said, “it’s important to deal with the rotten foundations.” I love that phrase because it’s very graphic, so that the jewel that is hidden underneath all that debris can truly manifest and that’s the jewel of our core essence, our soul qualities, our soul essence that cannot be tarnished. It can prevent us from being successful in our life, in work and relationships, an obstacle if we don’t do that work.

We can contact it when we see how we breathe, whether our breath is stronger in our left nostril or our right nostril. There are a lot of practices that help us to understand that balance and work with that balance. And Murshid says the whole of “The Message” is really about balance.

In terms of your retreat, it was my feeling that some of these Goddess archetypes could be very helpful in your healing process as well as helping you to deal, as I feel we all need to, with our own mother associations. That in order to be connected to the great mother, to the Divine mother, to mother earth, we also need to make peace with our relationships with our own mothers. But also with our fathers mind you. Many of us have over—developed so many masculine qualities in pure forms and distorted forms as a defense to feeling victimized by masculine energy—in your case, a raging violent alcoholic father. There is no room for the softness, no room for the part of us that just was a lot more subtle when we are surviving in that kind of household.

So just for balance we need to honor all parts of us, including that and knowing that it can be safe. It's very important in a love relationship, in a marriage to be our soft vulnerable self as well as the one who gets things done that many of us are trained to do. We need to come into balance with our feminine.

H: In non-Sufi terms, when Marion Woodman was here at the Abode in November, she talked about how the masculine and feminine archetypes that we discover within ourselves don't have as much to do with gender as with energy. Could you say something about that?

S: Well, Marion Woodman has been a real mentor for me on a lot of levels because I see her as very evolved in both her masculine and her feminine sides. She's worked very hard and long healing a major eating disorder, psychologically and spiritually, to the point where nothing comes out of her mouth, in my experience, that isn't absolutely authentic and from her experience. She did of course become a Jungian analyst but with a difference. She'll stand up to Jung in a minute about something she feels he didn't quite do fully, like around the feminine. So she takes what she knows to be true and then she adds her own experience.

It's true that it is an energetic thing. The Jemali and Jelali energies in Sufi terms and the anima and animus in Jungian terms are very much energetic phenomena. It's like we breathe in for the feminine and we breathe out for the masculine. There can be a misunderstanding that we are supposed be weak as women and strong as men. Or the masculine is about just being “out there” and the feminine is just being “in there.” No, these are principles. It's about a flow of energies back and forth so that we're all breathing in and breathing out. But if one is much more developed in the masculine principle, then

to balance with the feminine, we must learn how to breathe in and get guidance—open our intuitive doors so that we're getting guidance from a much higher level.

We also learn to accept that all of our emotional life is sacred. That means our rage and our anger and our fear as well as our love and our joy. And in a way it all comes from love. These are all expressions of love, pure and distorted. As Marion said in our small core solstice group, “You know, what it's all about anyway is love.” I never forgot that statement. I always come back to it. What is it? It's all about love. So there's a softness that comes in love that is very feminine. And when men possess this kind of love, when they can just be with it, it's just so beautiful to see. That's their feminine side. We're talking about masculine and feminine principles. Contemporary role models can be very useful in this respect.

H: One of the most important lessons that I learned throughout the course of the retreat was withdrawing the projections. I think that one of the reasons we had such difficulty in our marriage is that there is an archetypal dark mother that I was projecting onto my poor beloved husband, Zahir, and he actually had the archetypal dark mother that he was projecting onto me, as well. Of course we're going to bump heads.

Zahir did a five day retreat with you and also learned about the importance of withdrawing projections. We had a little work to do in addition to that but fundamentally, I think that was the bottom line of many of our problems. Everything else we could work out.

The other important lesson was owning qualities that seemed impossible to lay claim to, learning to embrace the shadow of myself.

One of the exercises that you gave me was to draw my father, but draw him energetically. Well, that was easy. Writing out the good qualities turned out to be a very short list. Then came the button—pushing qualities; this was a very long list but it felt good to do it. Then I had to own as a part of myself both these good and evil qualities.

The whole process was a question of learning to embrace my own shadow. Now I had to embrace it and transform it by deciding consciously to do something about it. This was not a comfortable exercise but the benefits have been immeasurable. A lot of energy goes into unconsciously holding something we dread at bay. This exercise frees up that energy which can be used for other, more productive purposes.

S: I think it is up to us who have worked with different psychospiritual methodologies and techniques to help create these new processes while working with the traditional methods as well. Because if you don't do that, in my experience, it doesn't last. You can do a *wazifa* from here to kingdom come and it doesn't stay in there because there is this other ‘stuff’ going on and it pushes it down and disables it. We want to be as clear a vessel as we can be. Owning our shadow may help. All of what comes up in a retreat should be honored. All of our issues are important because as we clear through everything, we become more and more empty of what is blocking us from being in touch with our clear self.

H: Could you say something about the artistic modalities that can be used in a retreat process like this?

S: In this retreat process various artistic modalities can be used very effectively. I see the retreat process as the core of our work because leaving the world and doing many hours of meditation can be a container for very deep inner experiences. For example, in *THE COSMIC CELEBRATION* we developed a whole form for participants to meditate about a Master, Saint, Prophet, angelic being or Goddess and to actually embody it, physicalize it, make the sounds of it, create the gestures like you would a character in the

play. In a retreat process retreatants may be invited to select a Prophet, Saint, Goddess, or a Teacher and enter his/her consciousness, do it as a deep meditation practice. To physicalize the character, sit there and change one's posture is a powerful experience. If one sits as Murshid, slouching isn't possible; one just can't. The guide helps the person to feel that he/she is entering the soul of that person, the consciousness of that person. Then, whatever comes up in the retreat, the retreatant is guided to get into the consciousness of Murshid, for example, and speak in the first person advising oneself from that consciousness. It's not a superficial thing to actually have to get into the body and get into the mind of the person you're portraying. It's not a game. It takes one further than if one were just meditating about Murshid's consciousness and seeing how he would help you solve the problem. It is very different and if people haven't experienced it they don't believe it. It just feels like, "oh, we're role playing." But there is something that happens that is truer, when entering the whole consciousness, the body, the mind, heart and soul of the person as you visualize him or her. It doesn't matter if the body is physicalized accurately. It's the retreatant's feeling and view of it that is important.

I can only tell you that I had the first experience of this in a very primitive form after I studied psychodrama, out of which all this comes. I was doing a therapy exchange with a fellow psychodramatist and I was really in a lost, very passionate, emotional state. So I got into playing the light and the light spoke to me in this drama I was in. I don't even remember what the issues were. I just remember it was really difficult. My friend was a great mirror. She let me see what I said as the light was exactly right. I could not get to the same clarity in the regular session. I mean, I was going back and forth and upside down trying to solve the issue. As soon as I became the light talking to myself, something shifted. I realized it was an experience of becoming one's higher self. At the time, I didn't know these phrases like 'higher self.' The experience was so powerful for me that I did it several times in the course of this process I was involved in. Every single time I enacted the light, another part of me knew the answer. It was as though I entered a higher consciousness who could see. While I was in my ordinary consciousness dealing with it, I didn't get it. I don't think I would have done it if I was told, "Just get into your higher self now and see it." I had to have a physical object, the lamp. Somehow it was very, very potent. When a guide has a personal experience it helps them to see that a particular method might possibly be useful to others.

If something is coming up like abuse or some other kind of trauma like that, be very careful. What we've learned in the course of retreats is don't push too hard for forgiveness. It's not healthy to forgive before you get angry, before you go through all your feelings about it, before you work it through. Then true forgiveness can happen and it's powerful. It's real.

There is also Pir Vilayat's ideal teacher meditation. The evolution of this practice is to do that meditation and then draw it, either abstractly or concretely; then do the same thing with the nemesis, meaning our button-pusher image, nobody we know, but what kinds of personality qualities push our buttons, and then draw those as well. So that's a way of holding both. Each drawing is physicalized, one at a time. The two characters represent these two parts of oneself and then the person has a dialogue between them.

What we discover in this exercise by uncovering this nemesis shadow, is that underneath this challenging character is the seat of awareness and power that has not been expressed.

So it becomes clear that one is not the good and the other is the bad. Seeing them in black and white terms is a very limited way of viewing these dimensions of ourselves.

It is really more subtle than that. This understanding begins to give us richness to our ideal mentor/teacher which is really our own soul qualities. So we break our concepts, our notions of what spiritual really is.

In my own experience, if we don't balance the light with the dark, it will balance us in ways that aren't fun.

Within a healing context, we invite people to sing soul songs in a sacred space—developed by my colleague Sarah Benson, a sound healer. And sometimes movement added to that allows something to come forth again, something that comes from no obvious place and often contains both dimensions that I'm talking about. It is definitely accessing what's below the surface but quite present. Writing poetry is a wonderful way to write about an aspect of a retreat, or an aspect of a certain spiritual experience. Putting the experience into poetry means one is concretizing it while allowing another level to come forth that possibly wasn't realized until one wrote. In the drama therapy/ sound-healing training that I do in Boston for 30 weeks, every session ends with writing for 20-30 minutes. It can be just prose, it can be poetry, it can be songs, it can be rhymes, it can be any "written form" and it's always different and people are astounded. When you get into a rhythm of doing that on a regular basis, wonderful connections and images emerge. The writing is a synthesizing process, but sometimes while writing other unconscious things may surface. Those are just a few examples of using drawing, writing, acting, sounding, singing; these are all ways to go deeper and to see what's below the surface in the unconscious so that, as Pir said, we can make the unconscious conscious because that's our work—in order to clear through issues and in order to discover and explore the multi-faceted dimensions of who we are.

H: Along those same lines, prior to the retreat I was feeling really stuck creatively. The energy was flat and colorless, just like my feelings about what had happened in my past. But a single practice in the last days of the retreat I found to be the climax of a very long process. That experience broke the dam in my creativity. It was on the 26th day. I was repeating the Dhikr and my mind was flip-flopping all over the place. Unexpectedly I felt this energy around me and a voice said, "Try to stay with it." So I went deeper and deeper into the Dhikr. I began having this image that was like a dream only I was very awake. I walked into a cave with a man by my side. I saw a two-year-old baby who was chained to the wall of the cave. The cave was very dark and enclosed. He unchained the baby and brought her out into the light. She wasn't crying. She was emaciated and very close to death. And he just held her. It was at that point I started to cry and cry. That baby he was holding was me.

The man walked back into the cave and I followed him. He held up a lantern and I could see children of all different ages chained to the walls of this cave. It occurred to me that every time my mother was beaten or there was a traumatic event in my house another child was chained to the wall of the cave. They all started calling to me and crying and saying, "Feed me! Love me! Take care of me!" I turned to the man, "How am I supposed to do this? There so many of them! Where do I even start?" The man answered, "Write about them. Write about every single one. It's time you gave each child her voice."

It was through that process that I began to feel all of the feelings that were too overwhelming to feel when I was a child. I had spent 20 years taking retreats, had been through years of psychotherapy and all that was to get to exactly this place. As of this writing, after having processed these children, my marriage is now on solid ground. I'm falling in love with my husband all over again. I'm taking flying lessons and he's my

flight instructor. The panic attacks are history. The depression is gone and I feel much more integrated and whole and more of who I am than I ever was before. Of course my husband took a five-day retreat and Saphira guided him. He stayed up the hill in a hut. He is no longer the bear he used to be and neither am I. This was an incredible process to go through.

S: This model has been used now several times after your retreat. The key is being able to get to what's below the surface consciously in the retreat, while doing all of the other things retreats do. This is the point we're making. Sometimes using creative modalities as well as spiritual practices can be quite effective. Practices—repeating wazaif, for example—catalyzes images, memories to surface. This, combined with other creative ways of creating movement in the psyche, helps to get at that which is hidden.

As we become more empty, we become better channels and vessels that can bring through the Divine intention in our lives individually and in our work for other people and with other people. Working with the self is a life-long work. Retreats can be a wonderful vehicle to go inward deeply, and within which to integrate our life lessons with our Divine inheritance. This might happen more effectively if some of our woundings and unresolved issues are worked with consciously. Then much can happen more clearly and more efficiently. I think we, on the Sufi path, all want to get as empty, as open and as conscious as we can, so we may become clearer instruments in the service to ourselves, our families, and our communities.