

# The Nature-based Transformation Retreat

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## SYNOPSIS

This article sets out a discussion of a five-day nature-based programme at Penny Brohn Cancer Care. This programme is built on the work of Joseph Campbell, particularly his work towards what he called 'The Monomyth' of the Hero's Journey. Within this framework, facilitators lead the group both indoors (in the Garden Room) but also accessing the five-acre garden at Penny Brohn. This offers the participants the opportunity to use nature-oriented interventions that encourage reflection, self encounter, group sharing and connection to nature. Within this article, the process of the course is explored and its connection to the Hero's Journey expanded. The writer also compares the possible outcomes with the work of post-traumatic growth theory and research. It is proposed that a future research/evaluation project could be carried out to explore impact within the themes set out in aspects of post-traumatic growth research.

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So often it is not the dark that calls our terror, rather the light arising in the east. For each dawn we can see who we truly are. There is no doubt that for many people a diagnosis of cancer is a very traumatic and frightening experience. Being told you have the disease is one aspect of the psychological and emotional impact, but just as this news hits home, further questions arise around treatment which can also be very difficult and challenging. The consequences of treatment can be the most difficult to incorporate into a life beyond cancer, or living the rest of one's life with cancer. A person (and those around them) must adapt to these consequences for the rest of their life.

As a facilitator at Penny Brohn Cancer Care I am constantly meeting clients who are struggling deeply with the huge impact that the cancer journey has had on their lives. The impact is across the whole person: their physical and emotional health, their finances and ability to work, their sense of self, their body image, their relationships, right down to the deepest meaning of their lives.

## Our Approach

Penny Brohn Cancer Care has been offering services for 33 years and now offers services across the UK. We use a *whole-person approach*, taking the position that people are not mechanistic collections of disconnected parts; rather, we are whole human beings, and when one aspect of who we are is affected, other aspects also respond. Our model of the whole person is based on the interaction of mind, body, emotion and spirit/soul.

## Our Services

We offer support free of charge, through a range of service levels at our 26-bedroom centre near Bristol.

Our two day **Living Well course** helps people learn tools, techniques and form a plan of how they can live as well as possible given the impact of the cancer journey. They can then come on to our three-day **Approach course** to work further on those plans in one-to-one sessions with a range of therapists, including nutritional therapists and an integrative doctor.

Those who want to deepen further have the option of

our **Retreat Programme**. In this article I explore one of these retreats. It is in the provision of this service that we encourage the deepest questions to emerge for the person, and offer a space where these can be explored and, potentially, a response found.

The retreats happen over five days at our purpose-built centre just outside Bristol. Participants arrive on a Monday morning and leave on Friday afternoon (see model timetable).

There are two retreat themes: the **Journey of Transformation Retreat** and the **Retreat into Stillness**.

## The Hero's Journey

Here I will only focus on the Journey of Transformation retreat, and specifically the nature-based version of this. The structure of this retreat is based on the work of Joseph Campbell and his discovery of 'The Monomyth' of the Hero's Journey. This myth is replayed across many great traditions and cultures. It is also the basic underlying story for many books and films. We have developed a way of presenting this very briefly for the clients as the background structure to the retreat.

In this journey a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of mystery and wonder where forces are encountered; often a deep challenge occurs; and a decisive victory may be won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with boons for his or her communities (Campbell, 2012); for a further nature based interpretation, see Plotkin (2003).

This, then, is the meta model of our transformation retreat. The basic structure of the descent into mystery/underworld/unconscious can be delivered with a number of themes or containers that encourage a person to deepen into themselves and discover the boon or gift. In my experience, the gift is an unfolding process rather than a one-off talent, expression etc. I believe the gift is the expression of the true depths of our human heart. In this article, I discuss the theme/container of applying nature-based practice to this retreat, and applying the hero's journey in the context of the garden space at Penny Brohn. This space has been designed with this journey in mind. In order to contextualise the process in potential outcomes I will also draw on the developing field of Post Traumatic Growth.

## Post-Traumatic Growth

At Penny Brohn Cancer Care it is common to hear clients say that, although cancer was a terrible thing, they have found ways to change their lives for the better, given this experience. What is it that facilitates this positive change? One way that this has been researched and explored is in the field of post-traumatic growth, the phenomenon of positive

change through the experience of trauma and adversity (O'Leary and Ickovics, 1995).

At the end of this article I will set out some of the possible outcomes of the transformation retreat within the context of the growing body of research in this area of trauma and growth, and relate it to the following themes set out in the systematic review by Kate Hefferon et al. (2009):

- Reappraisal of life and priorities
- Trauma equals development of self
- Existential re-evaluation
- New awareness of the body.

In my view all of these are relevant to what changes for participants on the Journey of Transformation retreat. Though we have not carried out a full research programme I think this would be a very interesting next step.

## The Programme and Process

The following is a model programme, which can vary.

### Monday

11.30	Introductions and course outline
12.00	Intentions
13.00	Lunch
14.00	Mindfulness in nature garden walk
15.15	Tea break
15.30	Calling of the land and finding a Nature Space
17.00	Review of the day
17.30	Free time
19.00	Supper
20.00	Relaxation

### Tuesday

08.00	Mindful movement
08.30	Breakfast
09.30	Council of the heart and sharing the journey
11.15	Break
12.00	Nature Space and sharing the story
13.00	Lunch
14.15	Individual bodywork appointments
17.30	Review of the day
18.00	Free time
19.00	Supper
20.00	Pat Pilkington Talk (founder of Penny Brohn)

### Wednesday

08.00	Mindful movement
08.30	Breakfast
09.30	Going through the threshold
	Nature Space
11.15	Music therapy
13.00	Lunch
14.00	Council of the heart/creative journal time
15.15	Break
16.00	Council of the heart/creative journal time
17.30	Free time
19.00	Supper
20.00	Free time

### Thursday

08.00	Mindful movement
08.30	Breakfast
09.30	Council of the heart
11.00	Break
11.30	Creative methods and meeting our deep self
13.00	Lunch

14.30	Being in the forest underworld
17.00	The Return
17.30	Free time
19.00	Supper
20.00	Dance and celebration
<b>Friday</b>	
08.00	Nature-based mindful movement
08.30	Breakfast
09.30	Bringing the gift back and integration
11.30	Ending session
13.00	Lunch
14.00	Going home

The process of the retreat begins with connection to the land, which in this context is our beautiful garden space, with the hero's journey represented by the path leading into the wild/mystery through a gateway into the depths of the dark wooded area, and returning back to the light and to our cedar summer house for the celebration and return.

During the week the whole journey is followed on the retreat, with the group circle located in different areas of the garden, representing different parts of the hero's journey. This provides a physical setting as a mirror to the inner journey.

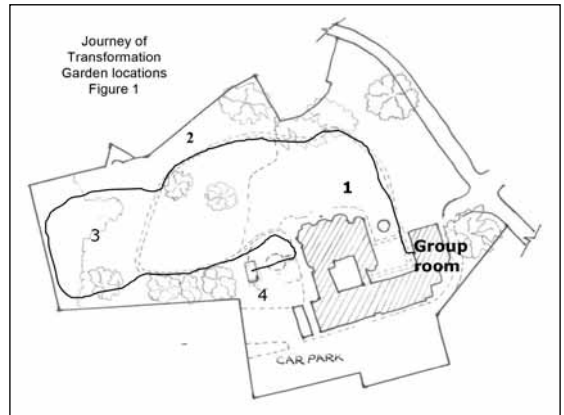
As you can see in the timetable above, we follow a process of connection to the land first through mindfulness in nature, particularly through our senses. We then invite participants to sense the calling of one or more places/spaces in the garden, and encourage them to spend time mindfully in these spaces, just observing what happens.

This will often lead to emerging themes (thoughts, feelings, memories, dreams, beings of the land, trees, animals, elements), and body experiences as reflected around them and/or experienced or felt in nature. They are encouraged to discuss this, journal it, write creatively through poetry or other writings, art works and nature sculpture.

We then create a threshold space to represent the gateway to the depths (mystery, unconscious, soul, wildness), and the participants spend time choosing whether or not to go through the threshold and touch into the depths, stay with these depths and creatively see what emerges, or share these emerging themes through our councils and/or small sharing support group work. The Council of the Heart comes from the work of Bill Plotkin and others, and relates to an open circle where people can share what is emerging. There is a ceremonial aspect to this as well, in order to create a sense of sacred space so that we may acknowledge the deep truth that can emerge in sharing from the depths of the human heart.

Participants then spend further time exploring and working with this emerging theme/boon/unfolding of self/ connection/creative expression, and in their own time returning through the threshold to bring this back for self, community and nature as a whole.

To enhance the experience and deepen the process we have a music therapy session with Professor Leslie Bunt who has designed the session around the theme of the hero's journey and nature. We also have individual body work sessions with experienced Penny Brohn practitioners, and a celebration dance on the Thursday evening. There is also a talk from our founder, Pat Pilkington.



## The Garden Space at Penny Brohn

- 1. The Call to adventure:** based on the first steps into the garden on days one and two, wandering mindfully and hearing the call, finding a place/spot/tree etc. that calls you.
- 2. Meeting the threshold:** On day three we sit with a liminal space encouraged by the development of threshold. We offer a time to consider deeply whether the participants want to face whatever is beyond the threshold, or hear the calling to go in and feel the longing to become more of who we really are; the terror that we have to face and the wounding that occurred to keep us away from our deepest self. The sense of threshold can be created by the participants in the garden spaces; anything can represent this and there is also an established threshold at the entrance to the garden from the group room.
- 3. Being in the depths/unknown:** On day four, being in the dark wooded area in the garden is a time for meeting oneself, finding the boon that offers further actualisation of self/ creative expression etc., and facing the fear which is so often the fear of this gift/boon. A threshold is created at the entrance to the wooded area, and the participants are invited to go in if they want to.
- 4. The return:** Bringing back the boon to one's life is as important as finding it. The integration of this into the person's life is vital, and we therefore spend time located in the cedar garden area in the newly built cedar house discussing what they are returning with (often creativity, direction, being 'more

myself', 'speaking my truth', being openly loving etc.), and how it can be integrated back into the person's life.

## Understanding the Impact/Outcome

There is no set defined evaluation process, beyond what the participants share during or soon after the course, and on a basic evaluation form. This, however, offers an insight into potential outcomes that could be explored.

In doing a future exploration I would like to frame this under the key themes as set out in the systematic review by Hefferon et al. (2009). I feel that these groupings do set out potential key areas where transformation can occur.

## Reappraisal of Life and Priorities

This is a very common reflection, often about the reality that life has changed dramatically, positively and negatively, after cancer. Priorities shift, significantly perhaps, around family, money, nature, learning new skills, etc. Will the retreat help to clarify priorities further as a 'gift' from the deepening into reflection?

## Trauma = Development of Self

The participants will often feel that the cancer journey has brought them into a deeper connection with themselves and with others; that a new sense of self is emerging that is more caring, loving, actualised. Does the retreat allow a greater sense of self to emerge, actualising potential, being more empathic?

## Existential Re-evaluation

The reflection on mortality, spirituality and meaning is a very significant part of the retreat programme. A deeper purpose can emerge within this re-evaluation process and there can be a clear sense that this is what a participant is taking away. Does the retreat allow further illumination on purpose, meaning and spiritual understanding (as defined by the client)?

## New Awareness of the Body

Understanding the relationship to body is also a potential key outcome of the retreat course. Part of this could be a deepening to the senses through nature connecting. A greater understanding of health and natural foods as improved health behaviours can be one of the greatest transformations after a diagnosis of illness. Does the retreat further enhance positive health outcomes and also encourage a deepening connection to natural (whole) foods?

I intend to explore these interesting questions further and carry out further research to understand how the work we do at Penny Brohn is helping people live well with and beyond cancer.

## Conclusion

I know as a facilitator that the work we carry out in the garden at Penny Brohn can have a very significant impact on participants. I know this because I am also deeply moved by the courage, commitment and openness I encounter from the participants. In my experience these are people who dare to look inside to find deeply felt and intuitively known aspects of themselves that are often hidden under years of suffering or neglect.

I also work with a very professional team - co facilitator and co developer Camilla Armstrong, nursing staff, music therapist Leslie Bunt, and dancing leaders who support the work we do at the centre.

The work is framed by the wonderful garden where our volunteer team have worked to create a healing and connecting space for our clients, staying true to the meta model of the Hero's Journey as a key aspect of design. I feel the combination of beautiful/light human designed spaces and darker/wilder areas offers extraordinary depth as a mirror to our human journey.

I would like to thank all these people, and of course all the clients who have had such a profound impact on me as they have privileged me in being alongside them in their truly heroic journeys. 🌱

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