

## **Inner Work, Immigration, and the Healing Process of Psychotherapy An Interview with Alexandra Rusu, MFT Consortium Stipend Recipient**

by Bonnie Bright, Ph.D.

Even at an early age, Alexandra Rusu found herself fascinated by the way people's bodies seemed to be affected by their emotions. When she was just five years old, she sat in on grownups' conversations so she could listen to their stories, a sure sign her daimon (the inspiring force within that connects us to our calling<sup>1</sup>) was at work even then. As an immigrant who fled the tyranny of Romania's Communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu when she was very young, Alexandra has been profoundly interested in healing and in the archetypal concept of "home." She also produces stunning paintings which grew out of her own work with a therapist.

Since she found the Counseling Psychology program with its emphasis in depth psychology at Pacifica a few years ago, she herself has felt at home in a field that emphasizes soul and the perspective of the soul. She perceives the art of counseling as being a bit like being a midwife of the soul, she offers.

Rusu, who grew up reading Jung, feels deeply about the sense of spiritual sustenance and meaning offered through our connections with the unconscious. Having studied at other schools that emphasized self-reflection, she maintains that Pacifica is the only place that has provided the sort of soulful connection and meaning she was seeking because it is "so heavily imbued in everything we do there." Even the spirit of the place of Pacifica has figured deeply in her experience there, she states, recalling the exquisite beauty and feel of the campus and the land it is on, the trees that have held special meaning for her, and the Marion Woodman rose garden honoring the great Jungian analyst who used to teach at Pacifica, and who inspired Rusu in great part to attend.

The way nature plays a part in our healing and in the wholeness of ourselves was a topic of discussion in Rusu's coursework in the Counseling program. She remembers one class in particular with Pacifica Chancellor, Stephen Aizenstat, where they talked about the connection with nature and how everything dreams—including nature. Now, as she moves into the world as a counselor and therapist, she definitely plans to integrate some of those ideas into her own work with clients. Emphasizing and working with the intricate connection between us and nature helps create a more whole human, she believes—an idea that is integral to therapy.

Rusu, who has previously studied transpersonal psychology and has attended programs with a strong Buddhist influence, suggests that she appreciates Pacifica because of its eclectic offerings that don't require students to narrow their focus to a particular set of teachings, making it feel more "whole" as a program. At the same time, she has been dramatically attracted to Jung's own exploration of his inner depths and his willingness to engage with the Unconscious, the unknown, even when it was difficult.

At Pacifica, aspects of our experience that feel frightening or dark are really accepted, she reports. There's an "earthiness to it where the darkness of what we all hold is accepted—and you feel like you can look at it." Through her studies at Pacifica, she has gained a deep appreciation and curiosity of the darkness.

Rusu, who, in her counseling traineeship, has been working with clients often living below the poverty line, sees a lot of drug addiction and an immense amount of trauma. She feels strongly that her training at Pacifica has helped her sit with that in a way that grounds her, allowing her to resist the urge to try to control, fix, or escape the difficulties she often encounters with her clients. She reports feeling very comfortable in session with clients who have experienced trauma, a fact that has created further interest in pursuing trauma work, and especially somatic psychology—working with the body and dealing with trauma and addictions. She's also interested in ADHD work and eating disorders, which she also encounters frequently, especially in the children and adolescents she works with. She believes her outlook on handling the unknown is different from other practitioners who attended other schools. Everyone deals

with the unknown differently, she admits, but she's grateful for feeling able and even comfortable wading into the scary aspects of working with trauma—scary often for both therapists and clients.

A recipient of the prestigious MFT Consortium Stipend, an award that supports the academic education and practicum training of mental health practitioners in underserved communities, Rusu is already well on her way to creating a career for herself in the field. She lives in a community that hosts with a very underserved population, including individuals with a multitude of different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, so there will be plenty of opportunity to gain rich experience from working with them as she moves her work further out into the world through the Stipend program.

She also attributes being selected to receive the Stipend to the fact that there is a strong focus on multicultural therapists—practitioners who are willing to work with other cultures—and her history as a political refugee who fled from a former communist country at a young age most certainly stood out.

Born in Bucharest, Romania, having escaped the dictatorship of Ceaușescu, with her parents and brother when she was five, her own family arrived in the US as immigrants seeking a better life. Growing up, she always experienced a significant difference between her home life, and life outside the home. Her friends at school were American, she confides, but at home, everything was very Romanian—a situation that created some questions about which culture she identified with more. Being raised in New York and New Jersey, however, she often encountered people that came from other countries, just like her, and relates to their experiences.

She expresses great compassion and concern for immigrants today, with increasing restrictions for coming to the U.S., and for the great (and growing) numbers of people who are fleeing war-torn countries, or who have often suffered famine, drought, or natural disasters. Recognizing the profound innate trauma stemming from those kinds of experiences, she is keenly aware of the tremendous need for therapists who can help such immigrants address the trauma that follows, and feels herself called to be of service in that arena.

Therapy can help immensely, she maintains, because the real home is within ourselves. It's possible to learn to be comfortable with the archetype of home within us, and that takes work. But upheaval in life is often what leads us to finding home within ourselves when home is nowhere to be found on the outside. If there isn't trauma on the outside, you never do the work to find what's on the inside, she asserts. Therefore, some of the unrest we experience is a gift because it helps us search deeper within ourselves.

I marvel at Rusu's perspective on her experience of being an immigrant, of being completely uprooted and coming to this country under extremely difficult circumstances, and how she finds herself coming full circle to be working with people who are also traumatized. Whether they have been uprooted in the literal sense, or psychologically and emotionally—providing the same kind of help that she herself required—has been fulfilling for her and for the clients she serves.

She sees the process of working through trauma as a kind of divine plan, an age-old archetypal story that happens when people go into the underworld; then come back out with something to offer to others as a result of their direct experience. Right now, especially, people need to share kindness and that compassion for each other, she asserts, foregoing the blame and the harshness that happens too often in the world. It starts with one person, with how you choose to see people and treat them. It's a domino effect, one we're seeing in our world leaders right now; in the way people run businesses, and how parents treat their children. "It's almost like we're called to lead in a different way if we've been through hurt. We know that we don't want to do that to others," she offers.

Meanwhile, she sees the work she's doing as a therapist extending out into everything else that she does, including the captivating art she began creating while working with her first therapist. The therapist suggested Rusu paint her emotions during their sessions together, Rusu relates, and that process turned into a full-blown love of abstract art.

“When I come in front of the canvas, I never really know what I'm going to paint,” she reveals. “It's like when people come into contact with one another. It's that unknown that's there, and it's the same in therapy. Instead of trying to grasp it or control it or manipulate it, we need to just sit with it sometimes.”

If anything, she continues, her artwork has reminded her time and again how we're all a channel for creating something in this world. No matter your career, whether a therapist, or an artist, or pursuing some other career, we are each a channel for something; it's up to us to choose to do with it.

I'm thrilled to hear Alexandra sells the paintings she creates to help make her living. The art, which was initiated and generated from the process of seeking to do her own inner work, has come alive; has taken on a life of its own, in fact. When we engage with art of any kind, I believe, we develop our own unique relationship with it; we enter into a dialogue. Then, when the work goes out into the world, it creates its own relationships with anyone who experiences it. Inevitably, it becomes healing for everyone—not unlike what happens in therapy.

It's the process, Rusu agrees; the process which is so rich with experience—and that is what transforms.

**Listen to the full audio interview with Alexandra Rusu here** (approx. 27 mins):

[https://depthinsights.com/wp-content/uploads/Inner-Work-Immigration-and-Psychotherapy\\_Alexandra-Rusu-and-Bonnie-Bright.mp3](https://depthinsights.com/wp-content/uploads/Inner-Work-Immigration-and-Psychotherapy_Alexandra-Rusu-and-Bonnie-Bright.mp3)

**Learn more about the Masters in Counseling Psychology program at Pacifica:**

<http://www.pacifica.edu/degree-programs/ma-counseling-psychology>

**View Alexandra Rusu's paintings** at [www.alexandraroxana.com](http://www.alexandraroxana.com)

---

<sup>1</sup> Read an informative post about the concept of the daimon, “James Hillman: The Daimon and the Search For a Calling”:  
<https://academyofideas.com/2016/02/james-hillman-the-daimon-and-the-search-for-a-calling/>

**Alexandra Rusu, MFTT**, is a depth oriented psychotherapist in training and a busy mother of four—as well as an artist. She finished her M.A. from Pacifica in May 2017. Her B.A. from Naropa University focused on transpersonal psychology and comparative religious studies. Alexandra spent over a decade as a massage therapist and has also taught yoga and meditation to adults and children. Attending Pacifica is a culmination of everything she has learned in the body-mind-spirit field up until now.

**Bonnie Bright, Ph.D.**, earned her doctorate in Depth Psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute. She is the founder of Depth Psychology Alliance, a free online community for everyone interested in depth psychologies. She is also the creator and executive editor of Depth Insights, a semi-annual scholarly journal, and regularly produces audio and video interviews on depth psychological topics. Bonnie is especially interested in ecopsychology, dream work, shamanism, and divination. She has completed 2-year certifications in Archetypal Pattern Analysis via the Assisi Institute, and in Indigenous African Spiritual Technologies with West African elder Malidoma Somé. She has also trained extensively in Holotropic Breathwork™ and the Enneagram.