Transpersonal Perspectives

Selected writings on Transpersonal Psychology from students, faculty and alumni

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Foreword: Transpersonal Perspectives

Les Lancaster & Jessica Bockler
Founding Directors of the Alef Trust

It is a great privilege to offer this foreword to the following collection of essays written by students of the Alef Trust during the course of their studies with us. It is now some ten years ago that we began the dialogue that eventuated in birthing the Alef Trust. The essays presented here reflect in many ways the issues that enlivened those dialogues—the need for transpersonal psychology to grow beyond its somewhat individualistic origins; the importance of addressing the global concerns of our day; respect for high-quality research and scholarship; the vacuity of explorations of consciousness when devoid of embodied practice; and, above all, our perception of the need for building a community that would be able to foster these shared values. The Alef Trust community is vibrant and growing, and, crucially, it is strongly outward-directed. All the students whose work is presented here are practitioners; they share a will to make a difference in the world.

Most of the students whose work is featured here have studied on our flagship programme, the MSc in Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology. As a title it certainly doesn’t roll easily off the tongue! Yet each of the terms included is essential to highlight a nexus that, we believe, lies at the core of the transitions characterising our age. Research into consciousness requires co-operation and mutual understanding across diverse disciplines. The notion that a team of neuroscientists, working in isolation from philosophers, or from those versed in spiritual and indigenous traditions, is going to unearth the answer, lurking in some crevice of the brain, is simply totally at odds with where the impulse to study consciousness is actually coming from. Consciousness is the mystery that underpins an understanding of humanity’s role in the cosmos. Some may think it quaint to ask, “Why are we here?” and “What is our role in creation?”, but growing numbers of people are asking such questions, and they are demanding that science should grow in its assumptions—and in its humility—in order to contribute meaningfully to answering them.

Questions concerning the mystery at the core of our being inevitably raise the second term in the MSc title, spirituality. And, increasingly it is spirituality without what is perceived as the burden of religion (Parsons, 2018) that defines our post-secular culture. The rise in interest in spirituality is on a scale that would hardly have been predicted fifty years ago, and it is
increasingly associated with activism. The spiritual narcissism (Ferrer, 2002) that characterised early phases of this transition has largely given way to a spirituality that is embedded in our relationship with nature and global concerns. Contemporary spirituality is fiercely immanent in character.

As will be clear from the foregoing, what is common to both recent approaches to consciousness and contemporary spirituality is the broadly ecological dimension—an awareness that our embeddedness in the world and its diversity, and the reciprocal relationship between all parts, is paramount. And it is this same embrace of holistic perspectives and activism that has become incorporated into the third limb of our MSc, transpersonal psychology, which along with allied fields, has become a home for research, theory and praxis envisioning and supporting human evolution.

There is no one term that can easily capture the essence of what is inculcated through the work of the Alef Trust; all of the above jostle in the meld that unites the community, with each individual adding their distinctive hue to the tapestry. And so with this eBook: integration across boundaries comes to the fore across all essays; that sense of engagement with global issues recurs; and our students’ passion to project their learning into applied fields provides the ballast throughout. Our academic discourse is grounded in what some may describe as a sacred activism, in which the inner spiritual work converges with compassionate service in the outer world. In Alef Trust, this sacred activism is tempered and honed by the fires of intellectual discernment, so that we may cultivate humility and nuanced discourse as we grapple with the big questions, and as our actions ripple into the world.

In the opening essay, Chantal Le Roux draws on current thinking in quantum theory and depth psychology to explore the ways in which our understanding of the unconscious shapes many features of our worldviews. The many insights she brings are spiced by her experience in working as a therapist. Chantal demonstrates how Jung’s fundamental postulate of the archetypes has become the touchstone around which speculation on the relation between subjective and objective realms revolves. Such speculation is not merely theoretical, but plays a critical role in the therapeutic journey towards an enriched sense of meaning and direction. As she asserts, synchronicities, for example, “are not unusual or special events that signify something outside of the experience, but rather represent opportunities for awakening into the profound holism of the universe.”

Jevon Dangeli’s championing of “open awareness” gives a timely warning on the consequences of excessive use of the IT devices that have become so dominant, especially in the lives of younger people. Psychiatric literature even has a name for those succumbing to this twenty-first century plague: “digital zombies”. Can we draw on practices rooted in spiritual contexts that have survived over centuries to re-engage our minds more productively? Jevon shows how “open awareness” meets the need. Again, it is Jevon’s professional experience (in his case, as a transpersonal coach) that galvanises his passion for this intervention strategy, which – as he explains – is a “mindful mode of perception accompanied by a calm, receptive, and resourceful state.”

Julie De Vitto argues for the value of engaging in therapeutic, or other healing, modalities within a framework that acknowledges transpersonal realms. This raises an interesting question concerning the differing roles of therapist and spiritual teacher. Can they be subsumed within one individual, or are the levels of experience required in each domain likely to preclude this? Or is it not so much an issue about the therapist/teacher directly, but rather of the kinds of distinctive issues that our twenty-first century re-awakening of spirituality brings—issues such as spiritual bypassing, spiritual emergency, or the anti-intellectual bias of much that passes as spiritual practice. Julie gives a potent synthesis drawing on pioneers including Roberto Assagioli, Arnold Mindell and Stanislav and Christina Grof.

“Modern psychiatry is in a state of crisis”, warns Nir Tadmor at the opening of his essay. The crisis is
indexed by statistics showing the rates of mental illness over recent years and projections for the near future, together with the ballooning dependence on anti-depressants and other medications. Nir shows how we are on the verge of a promising paradigm shift in psychiatry, one that will respect the spiritual dimensions in mental health and capitalise on recent research into psychedelics. As he writes, “By merging modern psychiatry with transpersonal psychology and ancient as well as modern spiritual practices, we can help create a safe and supportive environment for psychiatric patients and thus greatly contribute to the wellbeing of both patients and psychiatrists in the emerging paradigm.”

In addressing the nature of a contemporary sacred science, Markus Gern notes that “modern science is apparently growing beyond its limiting 17th century materialistic boundaries.” Recent moves towards a post-materialist science and psychology (Beauregard et al., 2014; Beauregard, Trent, & Schwartz, 2018), as well as recognition of the transpersonal relevance of a fractal epistemology (Marks-Tatlow, Shapiro, Wolf, & Friedman, 2020) are likely to revitalise a transpersonal psychology that is struggling to overcome a somewhat tarnished image. It is against these key trends that we would situate Markus’ claim that an openness to spiritual knowledge can expand the horizons that scientists work towards.

Bonnie Bright studied Transpersonal Coaching Psychology with the Alef Trust. Her premise is that, “transpersonal approaches to coaching ... benefit clients by helping them access those transcendent states that empower them to create significant change.” By introducing transpersonal practices into coaching a creative space may be created that facilitates a shift in the scale through which coachees may integrate their issues. As Bonnie writes, “egoic limitations soften, perceptions shift, and people engage with something bigger than the ego self to access greater wisdom, clarity, creativity, and insights.” Martha Sneyd and Donna Thomas both write about personal traumatic experiences that they recognise with hindsight as ushering in transpersonal growth. This role for the profoundly negative in spirituality has been observed by many—the “dark night of the soul” described by St John being a classic example. Both William James (1902/1982) and Sir Alastair Hardy (1979) brought their respective insights to this pattern, and recently Alef Trust faculty, Steve Taylor has researched the relations between trauma and “awakening experiences” in detail (Taylor & Egeto Szabo, 2017). The perspectives Martha and Donna bring are complementary in interesting ways, as are the details of their “dark night” experiences. Martha adopts the term “endarkenment”—used by Charles Tart in a talk to the Scientific and Medical Network—using it to explore her own experience in which the boundary between illumination and insanity became increasingly blurred. In a remarkably frank essay, Martha charts the territory through which she navigated a psychotic episode, finding the “purpose, meaning, and even wisdom” in her own endarkenment. Donna drew strength following an episode of burnout in which she “broke under the weight of increased work stress and the unexpected loss of a loved one.” Donna’s insight suggests that the real culprit was years of dissonance between her inner values and the outer persona she had to maintain, especially in her work context. Her analysis points to the role that unconscious dynamics play in the transition she experienced. Both Martha and Donna reveal their struggles and weave key theories from transpersonal psychology into their writing in ways that can offer insights to all of us in our own journeys.

The great Sufi poet and mystic, Rumi, wrote that, “The wound is the place where the Light enters you.” Just as this insight may be applied to the experiences of Martha and Donna, we would apply it also to Lorraine Clewer’s essay, in which she reflects on child sexual abuse. The essay charts her own journey of recovery from such abuse, succinctly and insightfully showing the interplay between medical, psychological, spiritual, and embodied levels of work. Her words speak for themselves: “The first steps required a surgeon’s skill to repair surface tissue; the next ones, the support of a therapist to find my voice. Beyond that, yoga and dance helped me connect with my soul, and even more deeply, meditation helped me reveal my spirit.”
Finally in this collection, Tania Botoulas brings a neuroscientific perspective by exploring McGilchrist’s (2009) characterisation of the right and left brain hemispheres as the “master” and “its emissary” respectively. McGilchrist’s has become an influential theory largely due to the timeliness of his critique of contemporary society. For him, the values our society fosters are out of balance due to an overreliance on left brain processing. Tania not only gives some insightful reflections on McGilchrist’s theory but also demonstrates its relevance for understanding autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), a condition at the core of her therapeutic work. For Tania, the theory can usefully be applied to the divergent brain organisation found in autistic individuals. Tania’s thinking extends beyond neurology, however. The rise in cases of ASD may reflect broader ecological and cultural challenges, and Tania concludes with a passionate claim: “Ultimately, left hemispheric thinking can compound the already evident Machiavellian bias through which profit is attained regardless to the cost of the environment, where science concerned with the microcosm has forgotten / forsaken the macrocosm and its interdependence on contextually bound stimuli.”

Tania’s concluding note exemplifies the wider perspective that a sound education in transpersonal psychology can bring. Beyond the specifics of particular theories, and the arguments between those advancing them, lies a shared vision. This vision is not simply about how psychology intersects with the profound heritage that spiritual, mystical, and indigenous traditions have bequeathed to us, important as that is. The vision is concerned with our place and responsibilities in the global context, the values that will enable us to live meaningfully in a deeply cared-for planet.

Tania’s essay serves once again to demonstrate the ways in which our students successfully integrate within their chosen professional fields material arising through their studies on our programme. It is, of course, no accident that this applied orientation is so strongly represented in our collection of essays. We at Alef Trust believe that the imperative to grow the transpersonal vision means that we must all contribute to enriching lives and promoting values for sustainability. It may sound like a cliché, but we genuinely want to facilitate our students making a difference in the world. And, in concluding this foreword, it is worth repeating that we believe this is where the future of transpersonal psychology lies. In the fifty years since the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology was founded much has changed—in psychology as a whole, in the culture in which we are embedded, and in the kinds of individuals that are being attracted to transpersonal studies. A discipline that is unable to move in synchrony with the flows that are shaping our world will inevitably die. And therefore our work recognises and responds to the needs of our day, for we believe that a transpersonal psychology fit for the 2020s and beyond is vital to the flourishing of individuals, societies, and our planet.

It is truly a pleasure to present this collection of essays to you ....

References


FOREWORD: TRANSPERSONAL PERSPECTIVES


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**Brian Les Lancaster**

*Brian Les Lancaster* is a Founding Director, and Dean of the Alef Trust. He is also Professor Emeritus of Transpersonal Psychology at Liverpool John Moores University, UK, and Associated Distinguished Professor of Integral and Transpersonal Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies, US. He has previously served as Chair of the Transpersonal Psychology Section of the British Psychological Society, as President of the International Transpersonal Association, and as a Board member of the Association for Transpersonal Psychology. Les is Co-Founder and Co-Director, with Professor Emerita Rosemary Anderson, of the Sacred Science Circle. His research interests focus on the cognitive neuroscience of consciousness and the connections between this topic and mysticism, specifically focusing on *Kabbalistic Psychology*. His published works include *The essence of kabbalah* and *Approaches to consciousness: The marriage of science and mysticism*.

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**Jessica Bockler**

*Jessica Bockler*, PhD is a Founding Director, and Programme Leader in applied and academic programmes of the Alef Trust. She is also the Founding Director of Creative Alternatives, an arts and mental health service which operates in the UK. Jessica is a trained performance artist and transpersonal psychologist with a passionate interest in expressive arts and ritual as vehicles for individual and collective transformation. She is Associated Faculty in the department of Integral and Transpersonal Psychology the California Institute of Integral Studies, US. In her ongoing performance training, Jessica has spent two decades exploring the actor’s craft as a vehicle for personal growth and development, engaging with creative practitioners in a broad spectrum of contexts: from esoteric theatre ritual groups in Northern California, to physical theatre ensembles in Italy and Denmark, to corporate performance coaching in New York City. Jessica specialises in transpersonal and somatic approaches to creative practice, combining expressive movement and vocal work with practices enhancing mindfulness and body awareness.
In order to grasp the nature of consciousness, the scope of exploration needs to include our experience of everyday reality and the material realm, as well as the realm of the unconscious and the dynamic forces that are hidden from—yet fundamental to—consciousness. This essay explores various theories that explain the dynamics between the “outer” world, the “inner” realm and consciousness. This exploration may serve to better understand ourselves and the influences that affect our perception and behaviour. Carl Jung, from a psychoanalytical starting point, and Wolfgang Pauli, from a background in quantum physics, demonstrated the ways in which these seemingly distinct paradigms in fact frame a spectrum of various models of the nature of reality and our understanding of consciousness (Main, 2014).

The Relationship Between the Unconscious and Consciousness

It is unfortunate that the term “unconscious” is likely to denote a less significant or unknowable form of consciousness. Whilst the contents of the unconscious may not be known directly, they may be revealed through analysing their effects on consciousness. The interpretation of reality is fundamentally influenced by schemas which are often part of the hermeneutic unconscious—the unconscious that allows for interpretation, giving meaning to our experiences and supporting self-reflection and understanding (Woody & Phillips, 1995).

The potentially therapeutic process of bringing these
unconscious influences to conscious awareness allows them to be understood and modified, changing our perception of reality. For example, an individual experiencing self-sabotage often undermines their own development and fails to implement strategies that could support their healing. By exploring their patterns of behaviour, they may realize certain related unconscious schemas, including self-doubt, a sense of worthlessness and a fundamental distrust of others. These schemas can then consciously be modified in order to change the individual’s belief system, replacing their self-sabotaging behaviour with self-healing.

When addressing the relationship between mind and matter, it is pertinent to consider that according to quantum physics, physical entities are more similar to the mind than they are to matter (Stapp, 2009). The unconscious mind conducts complex mental processes that are not usually available for conscious consideration, and provides images and thoughts to the conscious mind, which then perceives what is considered everyday reality (Oschman & Pressman, 2014).

Whilst psychological barriers separate consciousness and the unconscious (Oschman & Pressman, 2014), it is important to realize that these barriers are fluid and dependent on our level of self-awareness and on the ability to recognize the impact of the unconscious in our conscious experiences. That the unconscious can affect the material realm is significantly demonstrated by conversion disorders (Freud, cited in Oschman & Pressman, 2014), in which repressed information manifests as physical symptoms, which in turn may bring this information into consciousness. Examples of conversion disorders may include suppressed anger that is stored in the unconscious mind, manifesting in the physical body as tight hamstrings or unaddressed psychological trauma manifesting as stuttering.

According to Jung, the collective unconscious gives rise to the personal unconscious and consciousness (Frentz, 2011). The collective unconscious is comprised of information that was never conscious and owes its existence to heredity (Ko, 2011). The personal unconscious contains the adaptive unconscious, which processes vast amounts of information necessary for daily functioning, as well as information that was once part of the person’s conscious and has since been forgotten or repressed (Oschman & Pressman, 2014; Frentz, 2011).

Jung regarded the contents of personal consciousness as limited in comparison to that of the collective unconscious (Ko, 2011). Whyte (1962) agrees that the unconscious is more general and inclusive. Athletes may engage with hypnosis, visualization and psychotherapy in order to perform at their optimum level whilst requiring minimal conscious effort. This peak experience is an example of conscious preparation that can trigger unconscious processing (Pressman, 1977, 1979, 1980a, 1980b).

**Psychoid Archetypes**

The unconscious includes archetypes—inherited instincts of the psyche which predispose individuals to perceive, think, feel and act in certain ways. Archetypes are common to all humans and support individuation—the process of optimizing one’s psychological state (Frentz, 2011). The etymology of the word “archetype” is revealing: “arche” refers to that which is “primal” or “dominant”, and “type” refers to “form” (Jacobi 1959, Stevens 2015, p 52). The archetypes are psychoid—to use the term coined by Jung—in that they consist of and structure both the psyche and matter (Frentz, 2011). These structuring principles, in turn, change according to information from both the psychic and material realms.

The archetypes connect the collective unconscious to the individual consciousness, and the psyche connects events in the physical realm. Archetypes become evident as thoughts and images that contain emotional states (Oschman & Pressman, 2014), so that when an archetype is activated, the related emotions are experienced. These emotions influence our perceptions, and consequently, our behaviour and experiences (Hauke, 2014).
Whilst the archetypes cannot be known directly, their images, which are influenced by culture and the individual who experiences them, can be experienced directly within the material realm (Frentz, 2011). The archetypal images make complex information from the unconscious realm available to consciousness. The activated archetype may illuminate the connection and ultimate unity of the psyche, or inner state, and the material realm, or outer reality. The influence of the archetypes structures all spiritual forms of religion, art and science, as well as all forms of matter (Card, 2000).

Just as the unconscious influences our conscious experience and the material realm, so our level of consciousness affects the unconscious. Pauli recognized the importance of understanding the psyche of the observer as much as that which is observed (Stevens, 2015). Wheeler (1981) acknowledges the observer-participatory nature of the universe, in which consciousness may affect both matter and psyche. Ko (2011) expands this model to include the life force movement that connects, and ultimately unifies, the mind and nature—a central concept in divination systems, such as the I Ching. Being aware of the potential influence of the unconscious on our conscious experience encourages the observation of our behaviour and the exploration of the related areas of the psyche. Consciously creating space and allowing for previously unconscious elements to move into consciousness offers the potential to develop our self-understanding, as well as an understanding of the influence of the collective unconscious in our lives.

**Synchronicity**

Synchronicity involves an image that was unconscious being experienced directly (as a literal event) or indirectly (as a dream, thought or idea), and a seemingly objective event reflecting the same image (Jung, 1969, cited in Frentz, 2011). Jung (1960) defined synchronicity as a “meaningful coincidence” (p. 10) or an “acausal connecting principle” (p. 5), implying that there is not a direct cause that links the two events. Perhaps there are subtle causes or causes rooted in the unconscious of which we are consequently unaware.

The emotion-laden experience of synchronicity is usually accompanied by the activation of an archetype (Marlo & Kline, 1998), which may serve to fulfill an underlying need (Stevens, 2015), and which may be experienced positively or negatively. Perhaps the person in need directly triggers the occurrence of a synchronistic experience. This may be explained through a process in quantum mechanics in which the observer (in this case, the person in need) causes the event (in this case, the synchronistic experience) to manifest. This process of actualizing the properties of particles through observation is also known as the collapse of the wave function. Within the natural order of things, there may be a special order of things—the subjective process of connecting two seemingly unrelated events in order to add meaning to life. This would reveal valuable, but previously unrecognized insights, to the psyche, including needs, desires, and fears.

This process may explain the unique meaning that synchronicities hold for those experiencing them—something Jung recognized when considering the value of events that do not necessarily have a causal connection, but that are connected through the meaning they hold for those experiencing them (Main, 2014). An example may be a man who, after much deliberation, decides to buy an engagement ring. Just a few minutes after his decision, he receives an e-mail notification that a jewellery store that has the perfect ring is having a sale. While his decision to buy a ring and the jewellery sale do not seem causally connected, the man may interpret these events as confirmation that he has made the right decision. Indeed, encounters with the archetypes are often described as numinous, or having spiritual or divine qualities (Hauke, 2014).

Pauli recognized that the observer influences that which is observed, and that the observer is changed by their observation (in Main, 2014). This two-way transformation seems to hold weight in the argument that synchronicity seems more prevalent in the lives
of those who actively seek it. This implies that the experience of reality is dependent on the intentions of the observer (Stapp, 2007).

A pertinent consideration may be whether evidence of a synchronicity validates the event even if the person experiencing it does not find it meaningful. Consider the example of a woman who has a dream about her estranged father with whom she has not had contact for years. The day after the dream, whilst on a road-trip, she notices a sign saying, “Eagle’s Nest,” which is also the name of her father’s house.

Later that day she receives an unexpected message from her father’s brother, whom she has not seen for years, saying that he is in town and would like to see her. She could experience these events as synchronistic, relating the dream to both the sign and the message from her uncle, causing her to explore the deeper meaning thereof. She may even recognize a previously unconscious need to reconnect with her father. Would she have noticed the road sign were it not for the dream? Was the message from her uncle motivated by the same unseen forces that created the dream? Or, were these events entirely unrelated? Does the value of synchronicity depend solely on the meaning ascribed to it by those who experience it, or is there an objective valuation simply by its occurrence? Storm’s (1999) argument that synchronicity finds validity in those for whom it is meaningful seems well-founded.

It may be argued that the experience of synchronicity fulfills our innate need for cosmic specialness (Becker, 2014). However, Peat (cited in Frentz, 2011) argues that the experience of synchronicity offers insight into the implicate order—a deeper level of reality in which everything is connected and from which our everyday reality unfolds. Peat explains that information gives form to energy in order to create matter. This model invites the notion that the archetypes structure consciousness to create the material realm.

Likewise, it could be speculated that matter transfers information to the unconscious in order to evolve the archetypes. Peat (n.d.) describes the notions of the inner, subjective world (including thoughts, dreams and spirituality), and the outer, objective world (including energy, matter and science). Perhaps the real, objective, consistent world is the inner one and the subjective, ever-changing, self-created world is the outer one.

One’s understanding of the unconscious may be a determining factor in the view one takes. The fundamental separation of the inner and outer worlds is based on the assumption of duality and begs the question of whether synchronicity can serve as a bridge between the two worlds. Adopting a position of neutral monism, in which mind and matter are manifestations of a neutral basis and are not essentially distinct (Silberstein, 2009), allows for an explanation of synchronicity that is based on causality. Seemingly distinct events reflect a reality in which subject and object (or the individual and the world) define each other and cannot exist separately.

If we considered matter as an expression of mind, and body as an expression of spirit, and consider the possibility that these relationships involve a two-way, dynamic exchange of information, then the need for a bridge would be absurd. The theory of synchronicity then becomes the exploration of the workings of a

“Synchronicity may be regarded as moments of insight into this fluid interplay and ultimate unity that is the fabric of the universe.”
global system that transcends such distinction (Peat, n.d.). Synchronicity may be regarded as moments of insight into this fluid interplay and ultimate unity that is the fabric of the universe.

Bell’s theorem (Capra, 1999) implies a holistic model of the universe in which everything, known and unknown, is indivisible. The external, material world of science and rationality would then be one and the same as the internal, imaginal world of intuition and the psyche. From this perspective, it would seem that synchronicities are not unusual or special events that signify something outside of the experience, but rather represent opportunities for awakening into the profound holism of the universe.

Morphic Field Theory

Sheldrake’s (2014) theory of morphic fields resonates strongly with the theory of Jung’s archetypes. These higher level organizational patterns that determine the quantum potential of “reality” (Sheldrake, 2014) may be considered a field of propensity and the structuring influence of the psyche and the material realm. Whilst archetypes are limited to the human experience, morphic fields apply to the entire physical realm. These information fields of various levels exist within each other, and their influence can be top-down or bottom-up. An example may be the morphic field of a gene influencing the entire organism through genetic expression, and that of the entire organism, in turn, influencing the gene through epigenetics, the study of “how external forces, such as one’s environment and life experiences, trigger on-off mechanisms on the genetic switchboard” (Psychology Today, n.d., para. 1).

The theory of morphic fields remains controversial (Shermer, 2005) and there is much disagreement about the research findings that may support it (Blackmore, 2009). According to Sheldrake, one of the reasons for this is that the beliefs of the observer affect the outcomes of the experiment (Shermer, 2005). An exploration of the unconscious and the material realm would, however, be incomplete without considering the possible explanation that morphic field theory offers for the existence of collective memory (Sheldrake, 1997).
Sheldrake explains that we are most similar to previous versions of ourselves, and therefore resonate strongly with our past selves, perpetuating this resonant “essence” of self. On a collective level, we may resonate with others of similar resonance, tuning into their lived experiences and psyche, forming a collective unconscious (Sheldrake, 2013). The establishment of just such a morphic field, or family constellation (Meyburgh, 2005), may explain intrinsic memories and patterns of behaviour that are perpetuated through generations. This is an example of how information may be held in the unconscious, whilst the effects are evident and impact the material realm. This may also provide an explanation of the Hindu belief of karma (Sheldrake, 2014), which is a trace of memory that is stored in the unconscious as an impulse and which holds the potential to influence one’s actions (Coward, 2003). Since nature is all-encompassing, it follows that nature creates and embodies its own structure and habits which evolve (Stapp, 2009), supporting the theory of morphic fields.

While the theory of morphic resonance is not substantially supported by scientific data, it is yet to be disproved and provides an insightful model for considering the dynamics of the unconscious, conscious experience and the material realm. Potential therapeutic benefits may include identifying and understanding patterns of thinking and behaviour, which could then be changed. By increasing one’s awareness of the fundamental dynamics of such influences, the unconscious information that sustains the field may be altered. This could explain information that is carried from one generation to the next without conscious transference, but with significant effects, including certain propensities, psychological disorders and physical diseases.

Morphic fields could also explain our level of engagement with an activity or person. Common expressions such as “not being able to get into a book” or “being tuned into another person” may reflect an intuitive understanding of resonance. Morphic resonance could provide an explanation for certain dynamics in my therapy practice, including working with a child with challenging behaviour: at first, there may be resistance to therapeutic intervention, but through setting clear intentions and being fully present during the therapy session, I am able to engage with the child and resonate with them, resulting in a harmonious interaction. This echoes the Zen practice of resonating with one’s reality in order to experience harmony (Austin, 1998). While other possible explanations may exist, the widespread applicability of morphic field theory makes it a suitable basis for further exploration of the relationship between the unconscious and the material realm, and suggests that further research is due.

The Quantum Hologram Theory

Bohm’s theory of holomovement places primary importance on the implicate order, the realm of potentiality in which everything is enfolded. Events unfold and are actualized into the explicate order (the reality that we can experience directly) and enfold back into the implicate order (Frentz, 2011). This supports the idea of a fundamental unity of the unconscious and consciousness, the psyche and the material realm. This holistic, complete order of all things may be reflected, as a hologram, in the essence of space and time, and permeates all that arises.

Mitchell and Staretz (2011) consider the quantum hologram as a system of storing and retrieving information that is based on quantum phenomena that affect both the macro and micro levels of existence. Quantum emissions from an organism, for example, would contain information about the organism as a whole. There is increasing evidence that every physical entity resonates with a unique holographic image that contains holographic memory, much like an individual may be considered resonant with certain archetypes (Mitchell & Staretz, 2011).

The quantum hologram is non-local and it is possible to resonate with another entity’s quantum hologram, which would support the experience of synchronicity, as well as certain psi phenomena, like psychic healing (Mitchell & Staretz, 2011), healing prayer (Dossey, 1993), and telepathy (Sheldrake, 2017). This would
provide insights into the nature of reality and the consciousness that experiences it. The theory of a quantum hologram regards information, energy, and matter as equally fundamental, and as nature’s information storage and transference system. The very idea of the quantum hologram resonates with the idea of the collective unconscious (Mitchell & Staretz, 2011) and the workings of the archetypes.

Not only does this shift the emphasis in our search for meaning in life away from the material realm when considering the influences and meaning of energy and information, but this concept alters the way in which matter may be perceived. It is indeed a form of energy and information, and reflects the unconscious forms with which it resonates. An example is the traditional way in which Chinese medicinal herbs are cultivated: the area in which they are grown is carefully chosen, as the energy of the site fundamentally affects the structure and medicinal properties of the herb. Herbs grown in another area or under contrived conditions will contain different information, which will impact their effectiveness.

With this holistic understanding, it is possible to experience a fundamental shift in our perception, and conception, of reality. While the theory of a quantum hologram may not reflect Pauli’s hope for a neutral terminology that addresses both physics and the archetypes, it may reflect Jung’s idea of “Unus Mundus,” a transcendent unity, as well as Pauli’s belief that this unity could be rooted in science through quantum physics (Oppenheimer, n.d.).

Conclusion

While many of the theories addressed in this essay are scantily supported by experimental data, their value in contributing to a coherent model that deepens our understanding of the unconscious, conscious experience, and the material realm deserves acknowledgement. Limiting the realm of scientific exploration to that which finds validity in a laboratory would neglect the fundamental influences of context, relativity and the dynamic between the researcher and that which is researched. Just as Pauli experienced, science itself remains a barrier to further exploration of these theories and would do well to consider quantitative, as well as qualitative data and to expand its range of interpretive lenses to include intuition alongside intellect (in Oppenheimer, n.d.).

The implications of understanding consciousness as it relates to the material realm and the unconscious necessarily affects every aspect of our lives, including wellness practices and medication options, the organization of our homes, our work environments and relationships. The practice of yoga may be regarded as a physical, mental and energetic practice, affecting both the conscious and unconscious realms. The organization of one’s home may deeply influence one’s psyche and energy levels, since the house, furniture and space are expressions of energy and information that resonate with unconscious forms. Furthermore, Whyte (1962) believes that the unconscious is a source of spiritual knowledge and inspiration.

The unconscious, consciousness and the material realm may be viewed as a spectrum. Peat (1987) suggests that matter is the material realization of the archetypes. Card (2000) reiterates this by stating that mind and matter are complementary aspects of a holistic, unified reality. Therefore, Oschman and Pressman’s (2014) call for a multidisciplinary approach to advancing our understanding of both consciousness and of the unconscious is well-founded. Indeed, an understanding of consciousness without consideration for the relationship between the unconscious and the material realm would be superficial and unsatisfactory.

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Chantal le Roux

Chantal le Roux has a background in transpersonal psychology, special needs education, and holistic healing. As a South African who lived in China for many years, she has a deep respect for diverse cultures and values both traditional and contemporary healing modalities. She is a qualified Vinyasa yoga instructor and certified Applied Kinesiologist, and is passionate about transformation through integral practice. She works with clients to create an individualized programme that addresses the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual dimensions through her therapy practice, which she runs online and from home in Cape Town.
Open Awareness

The Game Changer

Jevon Dangeli,
MSc Transpersonal Psychology

In this essay I will introduce the skill and practice of open awareness, outlining the phenomenology that is associated with this distinct state and mode of perception. I will describe how it can be used to counteract the serious issues that are associated with its counterpoint, tunnel awareness, which is always present in the trigger events that lead to stress, anxiety, performance issues and burnout. The work will also address how open awareness skills can help to resolve the escalating problems that are associated with excessive use of mobile digital media devices, resulting in a generation of digital zombies.

A majority of my clients (in coaching and therapy) have suffered from the symptoms of stress, anxiety and burnout. In listening to how these clients have described their personal issues I consistently detected a particular pattern that was almost always present. After a careful and long-term assessment, investigating cases since 2004, I established that this
pattern played a crucial role in how these individuals were being negatively affected. The discovery was that at the onset of this pattern, its very trigger, involved a particular mode of perception in which these individuals had become completely focused with their attention on something unpleasant in the situation or on a predominant symptom. This focus was always narrowly fixated, thus these individuals were usually unaware of what else was possible or achievable in those situations. Even if they were aware of other possibilities, their locked-in ways of approaching the situation prevented them from establishing more resourceful perceptions and responses. In one sense, their problems arose because of tunnel awareness and remained problems largely because of this limited frame of reference.

Through learning how to open the aperture of their awareness and to integrate this broader perspective, these individuals have (to varying degrees) been able to shift their perception of themselves in relation to the challenging situation or symptom. This was brought about through the establishment of a more expanded sense of self from where the issue could be seen and approached from a more holistic perspective. The experimental process that I used in these sessions (which has become the open awareness technique) included guiding the client to embody their broader perspective, and from that expanded as well as interconnected sense of self, address the situation or symptom more mindfully and resourcefully. At very least, these individuals have experienced a positive and sustainable change. Healing and transformation have been frequent outcomes.

Over the past several years, clients of mine and of other open awareness facilitators have reported that open awareness not only enables them to deal with stressful situations more resourcefully, but they are able to establish a calm and mindful state with relative ease, as well as sleep better, concentrate for longer, overcome mental blocks and improve performance. Those who have integrated open awareness through practising it regularly have told me that they feel a deep sense of connection with other individuals. Some speak of an enhanced connection with nature and the spiritual realm, while others refer more to a sense of oneness in which there is no real separation between self and other (or between subject and object). With this comes inner peace and meaning in life.

The History of Open Awareness

Open awareness is a particular mode of perception in which individuals are attentive to both their own thoughts and feelings as well as those of others, including the context that connects them. It is a type of attention that is close to being simultaneously inward and outward focused, thereby making one more conscious of the interrelatedness of phenomena. The earliest tracings of open awareness appear to stem from Buddhist origins (Gunaratana, 1996) and it was possibly first introduced in the West through the teachings of George Ivanovich Gurdjieff in the early 1900s (Ouspensky, 1971). These days, aspects of open awareness have been integrated into some of the techniques of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) (Bandler & Grinder, 1976; Overdurf, 2013) and other psychological interventions, although it has received only nominal attention from the scientific community (E.G., Farb, et al., 2007, Hanson, 2011).

Opening the Aperture of Awareness

Open awareness involves the intentional observation of one’s thoughts, feelings, and sensory perceptions in the present through opening the aperture of one’s awareness. This type of opening is facilitated by means of expanding one’s mode of perception to include the aspects of each unfolding experience that usually occur in or beyond the outskirts of conscious awareness and which are therefore usually unconscious or disregarded. In addition to identifying the subtleties of one’s internal experience, open awareness includes becoming receptive to the energetic and relational links between oneself and others and the environment. Depending on the individual and their reason for practising open awareness, the experience of self fluctuates and is therefore not an ultimate state, but rather one in
which the individual experiences a felt sense of expansiveness and interconnection resulting from dis-identification from their limited self-concept. Open awareness is more than a technique, it is a natural mode of being, one that we, as humans, find ourselves in when we are completely free of burdens on every level—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual (Finlay, 2013).

**Escaping the Trap of Tunnel Awareness**

Research done by Olpin and Hesson (2015) suggests that stress is proliferating, with more people being negatively affected by it today than ever before. This points to the probability that we, as a society in general, are far from being free of burdens, which in turn may underlie why open awareness has become a largely forgotten trait or ability. Indeed, in an attempt to deal with the new or intensified types of challenges that the predominantly high-tech and fast-paced lifestyles of today demand, we are, to a certain degree, being forced from open awareness into tunnel awareness in order to fulfil many of our functions in both the workforce and in our social life. A potential resulting effect on us as a collective may be that we have become tuned out of what was, in past times, a more common state for us, in exchange for being tuned in to the devices that many believe make life convenient in this era. Society has never before had the technological means to capture and narrow our attention as it does today. With our online digital devices readily on hand, the media and the medium have merged, and the result is, to some extent, that we have become the victims of attention slavery, giving rise to a generation of digital zombies (Stiftung Louisenlund, 2016).

A digital zombie can be described as a person using digital technology to a point that they become fixated in an artificial reality. Psychiatrist and neuroscientist Manfred Spitzer (Stiftung Louisenlund, 2016) argues that digital zombies have difficulty looking people in the eye or carrying on healthy conversations. They are less aware of life happening around them (classic tunnel awareness), and they have limited social skills in the real world. Furthermore, they are prone to an early onset dementia, known as digital dementia (Stiftung Louisenlund, 2016). Generational research has shown that the more time we spend looking at screens, the more likely we are to experience psychological distress and depression (Twenge, 2017). Excessive
use of mobile digital devices (including smartphones) can potentially hard-wire tunnel awareness in children and adults, with detrimental consequences regarding health, learning and attention disorders, performance issues, relationship conflicts and social problems (Stiftung Louisenlund, 2016, Twenge, 2017). Tunnel awareness may be an underlying cause of the sense of separateness between individuals, religions, ethnic groups, etc. It narrows our perceptions and capacity to think, feel and behave holistically.

With our attention locked in by the gadgets (predominantly smart phones) that we have become accustomed to use in order to operate in this world, we may find ourselves unable or less able to release our attention, when appropriate, in order to interact with each other and our environment in an ethical and effective manner. The result on individuals may be a rise in specific social and relational problems, as well as elevated stress levels, which, if unresolved can lead to burnout (Brühlmann, 2011; Cartwright & Cooper, 1996). This phenomenon may in turn further convince one to retreat into a virtual world and to favour interacting with virtual “friends” for the sake of convenience, quick fixes, and immediate gratification (Twenge, 2017). This hypothesis suggests that as an increasing amount of the world’s human population becomes more tuned into a virtual reality, our ability to tune back out into the rest of reality may become jeopardised. In a mode of tunnel awareness, one may be less able to think creatively and deal with life’s stressors resourcefully (Farb, et al., 2007; Finlay, 2013; Hanson, 2011; Overdurf, 2013; Rossi, 1993; Ouspensky, 1971). On the other hand, if one is able to counteract such a narrowing of awareness, through applying a means to reopen one’s mode of perception, then the person may find that he or she is better equipped to navigate the multi-dimensional challenges of life beyond the flat screens of our electronic devices.

Open Awareness to the Rescue

Open awareness has been found to counteract stress, anxiety, and a sense of separateness by activating a calm and resourceful state that is accompanied by a sense of interconnectedness (Yates, 2015, Dangeli, 2015, Hanson, 2011). Through using and teaching open awareness techniques since 2004, as well as studying the phenomenology of open awareness in my 2015 MSc research, I have found that shifting out of tunnel awareness into open awareness can be achieved with relative ease by children and adults of at least moderate physical and psychological health. By introducing open awareness skills in learning environments and in the work place, the harmful effects of tunnel awareness can be prevented, and mindful resourcefulness can be promoted.

Embodying Open Awareness

In order for open awareness to be reliably available and effective in stressful situations, it needs to become embodied through regular practice. There are a variety of practices available today, many of which can be learned in a short amount of time. I’ve been practising judo since the age of five. During the 1990s, I began combining basic judo movements with yoga and qigong. Eventually a distinct practice that I refer to as jumi (judo mind) was established.
The core objective of jumi is to develop and embody open awareness. While jumi serves as a mind-body practice by itself, it can also be used to compliment other integral practices. There are jumi sequences suitable from young to old, at any level of fitness and psycho-spiritual development. These days I readily recommend jumi practice to my clients, and they consistently report positive results.

**Conclusion**

Open awareness (OA) is a mindful mode of perception accompanied by a calm, receptive, and resourceful state. OA cultivates metacognitive introspective awareness—in which the mind can observe its own state and activities— an awareness of the mind itself. OA enhances extrospective awareness—sensory perceptions and somatic experience. OA reframes one’s current experience of self, placing phenomena within one’s awareness as opposed to these being experienced separate from oneself. This reduces distress, enhances intuition, and promotes a sense of interconnection. OA can be easily learned and applied in all contexts. Jumi practice is recommend for embodying OA.

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Jevon Dängeli is a constant gardener in the field of consciousness studies. He is a certified NLP trainer, transpersonal coach and hypnotherapist, who has provided training in these areas since 2004. He has written seven training manuals and recorded over 30 audio-programmes, as well as a comprehensive video series where he teaches a vast range of empowering and transformative methods. Jevon gained his MSc in Professional Development (Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology) from Alef Trust. His dissertation research focused on the value of mindfulness-based practice for people experiencing chronic stress and burnout. Jevon is a co-founder of the International Association of Coaches, Therapists and Mentors (IACTM), which includes a Foundation that aims to provide humanitarian aid volunteers with free educational resources and support. He is the developer of the ‘Authentic Self-Empowerment (ASE)’ approach that combines the holistic aspects of NLP with mindfulness and transpersonal psychology. For more information see: Authentic Self-Empowerment.

Visit the Open Awareness Website:
http://authentic-self-empowerment.com/oa/

Visit the Jumi website:
http://jumi.live
Transpersonal Psychotherapy and Counselling Rooted in Traditions

Julie De Vitto
Within this essay, I argue for the added value of transpersonal psychotherapies that are rooted in spiritual traditions, and I also consider the importance of psychotherapy and counselling for individuals engaging in contemporary spiritual practices outside of spiritual traditions. I draw on examples of transpersonal therapies that are based on practices found especially within Eastern spiritual traditions, which I propose support a balanced approach to whole person development. I base my understanding on the premise that transpersonal psychotherapy aligns with the beliefs of mystical and spiritual traditions, and consists of the common goal of moving towards wholeness or a higher Self. I discuss how transpersonal psychotherapy, which is rooted in spiritual traditions, may provide a framework for those who face spiritual or transpersonal experiences outside of a particular tradition, and how this approach may avoid the limitations found within the traditional model of psychotherapy.

Transpersonal psychotherapy is based on the paradigm of transpersonal psychology, which has progressed from the earlier cognitive-behavioural and humanistic approaches, and which is often referred to as a “fourth force” in psychology (Leuger & Sheikh, 1989). The transpersonal paradigm emphasizes the study of transformation in addition to acknowledging the beyond ego, transcendent and spiritual domains of human experience. It is argued that these dimensions are often ignored by mainstream psychotherapy, which tends to focus on the personal and goal driven dimension of being (Firman & Vargiu, 1996). Our understanding of the personal or “ego” level of self is based on scientism, which assumes that knowledge gained through natural science is the only valid knowledge that is available. This scientific paradigm has been criticised and described as ethnocentric and cognicentric (Harner, 1980).

Research on shamanism conducted by the late anthropologist, Michael Harner, suggests that those who experience mystical or transpersonal states—states going beyond the mere personal—are sometimes stigmatised with psychosis because of an ethnocentric bias which determines our judgement of what is normal or pathological. This often results in mainstream psychotherapy ignoring the spiritual dimensions, instead focusing predominantly on the ego-based struggles faced by individuals in our contemporary society. These personal levels of self should not be ignored. However, transpersonal psychotherapy is valuable as it can embrace the personal while also acknowledging and integrating the transpersonal aspects. “The personal and the transpersonal dimensions are distinct but not separate. Both are natural to human unfoldment,” assert Firman & Vargiu (1996, p. 119).

In comparison to the mainstream approach of psychotherapy or counselling, development within spiritual or mystical traditions places more emphasis on the transpersonal, beyond-ego part of being. John Welwood (2014) a psychologist who integrates psychological and spiritual concepts, argues that an overemphasis on the development of the personal or transpersonal levels of self can result in an imbalance within the person. He suggests there are three key areas of development which include the suprapersonal, the personal, and the interpersonal.

The suprapersonal is understood as the beyond ego spiritual dimension of one’s being. Welwood (2014) discusses the concept of spiritual bypassing, where some individuals who seek out spirituality and spiritual practices may overly focus on suprapersonal development as a way of avoiding or denying their personal and interpersonal struggles. This may lead to an imbalance within the person. “Living in the world often brings up unresolved psychological issues that spiritual practice is not designed to address,” writes Welwood, (2014, p. 215).

Spiritual bypassing appears to be a dominant issue in contemporary society. For example, individuals attending spiritual retreats or engaging in condensed periods of spiritual practices where they may hide away from social interaction or engagements for a period of time is beneficial for spiritual and personal development. However, it doesn’t necessarily mean what is learned within those particular environments can be integrated and applied into day-to-day life.
I have recognised this within my own spiritual path whereby I have been strongly drawn towards the knowledge and practices held within Eastern traditions such as Buddhist philosophy, meditation, and yoga. In retrospect, I can perceive how, in the beginning, certain parts of my engagement in spiritual practices were brought about as a rejection of my human experience and the struggles that come with it. Yet, it is largely through my spiritual practices such as Buddhist meditation and yoga retreats, which I now attend on a yearly basis, that I have discovered the importance of finding a balance between the transpersonal, personal, and interpersonal levels of my being. I don’t perceive these levels of development as separate, but rather as interconnected, and I have experienced the development on one level of my being, leading to the necessity of addressing the development on other levels, as well.

It has been my own experience that spending time in retreats and engaging in spiritual practices provides space in which to question and re-evaluate our personal and interpersonal relationships, and therefore such experiences are valuable in giving us perspective on our “conditioned mind,” and in shifting our habits, beliefs, and values. I have found in practice that the learning within the environment of a spiritual retreat can be applied and integrated into daily life. However, it is my experience that this is more readily done with the continued support of a teacher, coach, therapist, or counsellor. I think this type of support can also be supplied through a community which recognizes such transpersonal aspects of being.

Other theories argue that if the personal self is not strongly developed, overly focusing on the transpersonal dimension, it may result in the personal self not being able to deal with the energies that come from spiritual practices. This is especially problematic when these experiences occur without a framework in which to place them, or without a teacher or therapist who recognises the transpersonal dimensions. This further reinforces the value of psychotherapy which is rooted in spiritual traditions and can acknowledge the personal and transpersonal dimension within a particular framework and wealth of knowledge that has been taken from the spiritual tradition and practices.

Italian psychiatrist and transpersonal pioneer, Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974) described different levels of being. In addition to the ‘I’ self, he included the superconscious and transpersonal Self (in Firman & Gila, 2002). The superconscious refers to the spiritual or transcendent aspect of human consciousness. Assagioli suggested development must not only involve detaching from the “I” and becoming an observer of the self, but an individual must also be able to move beyond the superconscious. He insisted there is a danger of becoming attached to the experiences of the superconscious which may result in ego inflation, or if the “I” is not strongly developed, there may be a loss of the ego or “I” which results in difficulties. Assagioli, therefore, offered that through the process of psychosynthesis (which integrates the spiritual component of experience), both the personal and transpersonal self can be developed successfully to achieve wholeness. To move towards the Self, we need to experience the “I” and to know what is not the Self by way of negation through a fully formed “I”.

As John Welwood (2014) describes, simply denying...
the existence of the ego may be counterproductive. A desire to escape from personal and interpersonal issues may result in an over-striving towards the transpersonal, and in a misunderstanding of what it means to move beyond the ego. This is one of the paradoxes of spiritual development in which the striving itself becomes counterproductive, and again, this appears to be a more prevalent issue with the rise of secular spiritual practices outside of the context of tradition. Within a secular context, there is a risk of the teachings being misunderstood, diluted, or changed, and this can be particularly problematic when only a particular aspect of a spiritual practice is being applied.

One example of this imbalance can be found within the secular mindfulness movement. Vishvapani (2012) identifies this issue and argues that the Insight Meditation Movement (IMM) is a stripped-down approach that doesn’t necessarily acknowledge the “sangha” or community—nor the rituals and ethics that come with the Buddhist teachings—as a holistic approach to living. He emphasises how secular mindfulness practices focus on stress reduction, which doesn’t necessarily mean that individuals are integrating these practices into their day-to-day life or using their mindfulness practices for spiritual or transpersonal developments of their being.

I perceive mindfulness practice as only a part of what would constitute as whole-person development, which brings into question how we develop ethics, morals, and values in society if we are only applying certain practices outside of their traditions. I think there is value in the freedom of forming our own morals and values outside of the traditions, and I relate strongly to the perennial philosophy (Huxley, 1985). This philosophy sees the same metaphysical truth being expressed through different religions, languages and labels, and enables a secular approach to spiritual practices. The perennial philosophy is also linked to the integration of contemporary spiritual practices and transpersonal therapies in a secular context.

In addition, transpersonal psychotherapy that is rooted in spiritual traditions is valuable as there is often confusion surrounding spiritual awakening or transformations within a Western context, whereby these experiences are often pathologized. Stanislav Grof and the late Christina Grof, who researched non-ordinary states of consciousness, coined the terms “spiritual emergence” and “spiritual emergency.” Spiritual emergence can be defined as a gradual transformation of the psyche, and a spiritual emergency may be “an intense and dramatic experience that disturbs the normal stable structure of the mind” (Grof, 2000). Correct diagnosis and understanding of a spiritual dimension and the process of spiritual emergence or awakenings is essential.

As the researchers Mark Kasprow and Bruce Scotton (1999) submit, the outcome of such experiences can be perceived as either positive or destructive depending on the ego’s readiness for such experiences, and how meaning is applied to these experiences is essential. Paul Maiteny (2017b) emphasises the distinction between experience and meaning in which the experience itself is not inherently meaningful, therefore implying the importance of guidance through such experiences in which individuals can apply meaning. With the rise of spiritual practices taking place in a secular context, without a specific guide or framework in which to place these experiences, an individual may not be able to fully understand and integrate their experiences successfully. Therefore, transpersonal psychotherapy, which applies knowledge from spiritual traditions, can be helpful in understanding and embodying these experiences, as opposed to rejecting or pathologizing them.

A commonly reported example of an unexpected spiritual experience is that of kundalini awakening within the body. The yoga and tantric traditions describe kundalini as an energy that lies coiled and dormant at the base of the spine in the form of a “seed,” and which, when awakened, travels up the sushumna, the main energy channel of the body. One reaches spiritual awakening when the energy reaches and is successfully settled in the seventh chakra. It has been documented that kundalini awakening may be problematic and extremely distressing for individuals (Greyson, 1993). Awakened kundalini energy can be
so overwhelming that it disturbs the balance of one’s physical and mental state, creating difficulty with its integration. This is especially the case if the body is not prepared and the energy is not guided correctly (Sovatsky, 1999).

I argue that a transpersonal approach, which recognises the spiritual dimension while also recognising the importance of the physical, human, and egoic aspect of ourselves, is essential. In regards to this, I have resonated with the work of Process Oriented Therapy, which is not concerned with change, but rather with awareness, and which is rooted in the spiritual tradition of Taoism. “Process work is about noticing the signals that point to the river, and unfolding the meaning embedded in them” notes Siver (2005, p. 2). This approach, developed by Arnold Mindell who formerly called it “dream body work,” collaborates with the exploration of experiences within the body, synchronicities, dreams, and other altered states of consciousness (Siver, 2005). The idea behind the dream body is that somatic experiences and symptoms reveal information that needs to be addressed by an individual (Mindell, 1982). This type of process work supports therapists in looking beyond illness or pathology and views the meaning behind each individual’s current situation, behaviours, and thought processes. Within this approach, the therapist is facilitating awareness within the client, and thus is not acting to solve or change anything.

Process work shows similarities to Vipassana meditation, in which awareness is the crucial element in development. Meditation is also a common example
in which spiritual practices are being increasingly integrated into contemporary therapy. The goal of psychotherapy is for our unconscious processes to become conscious, which aligns with the Buddhist approaches of Vipassana meditation. However, the use of meditation as a tool without correct guidance has been cautioned in some cases because of potential dangers when an individual has pre-existing issues with their sense of self. For example, the practice of Vipassana meditation, which brings awareness to the body, may also bring up previous traumas (Kasprow and Scotton, 1999). I argue that the rise in meditation and mindfulness practice is beneficial and a positive movement within contemporary society. However, it is even more beneficial to have the correct support and guidance through such practices if they are being used beyond the purpose of stress reduction, as the practice can potentially lead to more intense experiences and emotions which arise from the unconscious.

Other therapies which have integrated spiritual methodologies with Western transpersonal therapy include the work of the aforementioned Stanislav Grof (2000). Grof’s work focuses on the healing potential of non-ordinary states of consciousness, which he labels as “holotropic” states, meaning “moving in the direction of wholeness” (Grof, 2000, p. 2). These states can be reached through holotropic breathwork, and may include chanting, breathing, drumming, or rhythmic dancing. Holotropic states allow for information that is not normally accessible in our normal state of consciousness to be reached. This might include unconscious emotional difficulties,
specific images or visions, and interpersonal problems which otherwise lay in our unconscious.

Holotropic states like Grof and Grof (1989) devised through their specific breathwork method might also be accessed through well-known spiritual practices, including yogic breath work, Vipassana meditation, and other methods found within mystical and spiritual traditions. I have taken part in a form of holotropic breathwork, and during the session, I experienced bodily sensations, the movement of energy within my body, and a deep emotional release. I found the overall experience to be therapeutic, healing, and impactful. This was also because it included working with a partner and it was in a group environment in which I witnessed and shared the healing process with others. However, there was no formal follow-up to process the experiences, which I believe would be beneficial and should be a consideration for transpersonal therapies using such methods for the correct guidance and integration of the experiences. Again, this relates to the importance of how meaning is applied to the experiences and can be supported through continued transpersonal therapy or counselling.

To summarise, I have argued how transpersonal psychotherapy and counselling that is rooted in practices stemming from spiritual traditions can be particularly beneficial for individuals whose belief systems include that of the transpersonal dimension. In particular, I consider these practices to be supportive for individuals who have spiritual or transpersonal experiences as they may not be properly acknowledged through mainstream psychotherapy or counselling.

I have also highlighted the benefits of transpersonal therapy in providing guidance for individuals, and this can be essential to how people apply meaning to their spiritual awakening experiences. Transpersonal therapy or counselling is argued to be helpful for individuals to integrate the transpersonal into their personal and interpersonal levels of being. I have discussed some methodologies which are rooted within spiritual traditions and which I believe to be beneficial as they account for the subtle body, awareness of somatic symptoms, and because they use altered states of consciousness in which to address the subconscious and transpersonal dimensions in a whole-person approach to development. I believe that further integration of the Eastern methodologies within Western psychotherapy would be beneficial in helping individuals to integrate spiritual experiences and practices into their day-to-day life.

References


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**Julie De Vitto** has completed her MSc in Consciousness, Spirituality, and Transpersonal Psychology through Alef Trust. For her final research project, she researched the experiences of self-healing and transformation within Reiki Practitioners through the methodology of intuitive inquiry. She is working towards certification in Transpersonal Coaching and has previously trained as an Authentic-Self-Empowerment Facilitator, Reiki Healer-Teacher and Sound Therapist. She combines these techniques to offer holistic approaches to self-healing that are based on her learning within Transpersonal Psychology and Coaching.
Towards a Transpersonal Psychiatry

Nir Tadmor
Modern psychiatry is in a state of crisis. 450 million people around the globe are affected by mental illness (1 in 10 adults). Looking at Europe and the U.S., over 40% of the total burden of disability is related to mental illness, and over 10 million Prozac prescriptions were issued in the first 5 years after its introduction into the pharmaceutical market (Powell, 2007). In 2013 and in England alone, over 53 million prescriptions were issued for antidepressants, a 6% increase on the previous year and a 92% increase since 2003 (Rose, 2016). The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that each year approximately 800,000 people commit suicide, which represents a global mortality rate of one death every 40 seconds, and it is predicted that by 2020 the rate of death will increase to one every 20 seconds (WHO, 2014).

In order to respond to the growing collective distress, psychiatry will have to go through a global paradigm shift, where issues like meaning, faith, belief in GOD and altered states of consciousness, as well as advanced psycho-social models for crisis intervention will have to be common psychiatric knowledge. The following pages will begin with a short review of the origins of psychiatry and psychopathology and continue with a discussion on the role that transpersonal theory and practice can play in the transformation of the current paradigm in psychiatry.

The first hospitals for curing mental illness were established in India during the 3rd century BCE (Koenig, 2009), where the earliest known texts on mental disorders, the Charaka Samhita, were compiled between the 1st century BCE and the 2nd century CE (Scull, 2013). Already in the 4th century BCE, Hippocrates saw physiological abnormalities as a possible root of mental disorders (Elkes & Thorpe, 1967) and thus can be seen as the father of biological psychiatry. Today, although we know that neurobiological factors are playing a key role in modulating mood and behavior, we can also see that a psychopharmacological, electroconvulsive, or any other physical intervention are far from being enough to support a person who is going through a mental crisis. The term “psychiatry” literally means the “medical treatment of the soul” (from ancient Greek psykhē “soul”; -iatry “medical treatment”) and it seems that many of the conflicts that arise these days in psychiatric practice can be traced back to the very notion that the soul could be medically treated.

Nikolas Rose (2016), a professor of sociology in King’s College London, explains that the extent of diagnosable ‘brain disorders’ (between 25% and 33%), the view of the brain as the ultimate locus for explanations of mental disorders and the use of psychiatric drugs as the primary mode of intervention, all contribute to the current crisis in psychiatry (Rose, 2016). Rose also emphasizes that when the American Psychiatric Association (2013) published the 5th Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, there was not a single clinically validated biomarker for any psychiatric disorder, and that the genome wide association studies (GWAS) methodology have failed to provide any major insight into the genomic bases of psychiatric disorders (Rose, 2016). Some of Rose’s (2016) conclusions are that we should go back to view mental disorders as a “disorder of a whole person” (p. 97) (and not just the brain), while taking notice of the patient’s social and environmental setting; that we should remember that the patient is not “merely a sum of parts that can be isolated and experimented on in the purified space of the laboratory” and then extrapolated to the whole; that there is a clear correlation between diagnoses of mental disorder and “a whole range of undesirable social conditions” (p. 98); and that maybe the most revolutionary development will come from “the recognition that the voices of those who are the subjects of psychiatry must have a crucial role in shaping the ways in which their ailments are understood and treated” (p. 99).

While psychotherapeutic and social interventions can provide a great deal of support for psychiatric patients (whether if with or without medication), an issue that was not mentioned in Rose’s provocative editorial is that the majority of psychiatric patients do not have someone to process the spiritual nature of their experience with. In a survey of 52 psychiatric inpatients in Minnesota, 95% of the patients declared a strong belief in God (Kroll & Sheehan, 1989).
In another study, over 80% felt that their spiritual beliefs had a positive impact on their illness, yet over a third of them did not feel that they were able to discuss spiritual matters with their psychiatrists (Lindgren & Coursey, 1995). A study conducted by Bergin & Jensen (1990) showed that while in general population over 80% have a belief in God or a higher power, around only a third of psychiatrists and psychologists hold such beliefs. Thus, it is important to remember that when it comes to spiritual beliefs, it is not the psychiatrists that represent the norm (Powell, 2002). One reason for that gap might be the lack of spiritual knowledge and practice in current training programs for health professionals and the over-emphasis on the medical model. The following excerpt from a report of the WHO (World Health Organization) is emphasizing this point (WHO, 1998):

The health professions have largely followed a medical model, which seeks to treat patients by focusing on medicines and surgery, and gives less importance to beliefs and to faith – in healing, in the physician and in the doctor-patient relationship. This reductionism or mechanistic view of patients as being only a material body is no longer satisfactory. Patients and physicians have begun to realise the value of elements such as faith, hope and compassion in the healing process (p. 7).

According to David Nichols, Professor Emeritus of Pharmacology in Purdue University and the founding president of the Heffter Research Institute, the current neurobiological paradigm in psychiatry emerged in 1954, when the discovery of the structural relationship between LSD and serotonin, lead to the realization that LSD's mental effects are caused by its interaction with the serotonergic system. This was the first formal recognition that perhaps brain chemistry had something to do with behavior, and particularly with mental illness (Nichols, 2013). In the words of Nichols: “To put things in context, up until that time, mainstream psychiatry had no idea that behavior might arise from neurochemical events in the brain” (2013, p. 22).

Between the 1950s and mid-1960s, LSD-assisted psychotherapy was an active research field, with more than 40,000 patients who contributed to the publication of 1,000 clinical papers on the subject (Grinspoon & Bakalar, 1979). Research with this novel molecule came to an almost complete stop after it was declared as a Schedule I drug in the United States during the mid-1960s. Luckily, the rigorous psychedelic research that took place until that time was enough to draw the attention of many respected psychologists and psychiatrists to the importance of transcendent states and spiritual experiences for the psychotherapeutic process. One of these respected researchers was Stanislav Grof. After having himself a powerful transformative experience (Sala, 2008) using LSD as a research participant during his medical training, Grof decided to dedicate his life to the study of non-ordinary states of consciousness (NOSC). During the very same years that psychedelic drugs were made illegal in the United States, a group of researchers that included Abraham Maslow, Anthony Sutich, Miles Vich, Sonya Margulies and Stanislav Grof (Grof, 2008) were meeting with the intention to propel a new “force” in psychology. The result of these meetings was the establishment of transpersonal psychology, which was called by Maslow “the fourth force”.

During the last 50 years, transpersonal researchers have been exploring and analyzing the relationship between body, mind, spirit and cosmos, whether through the creation of astonishing cartographies of the psyche, through rigorous empirical research, through psychotherapeutic practice or through their own spiritual experiences. Unfortunately, very little of the profound insights that were gained during the last 50 years of research managed to create an impact on mainstream psychiatry.

In The Textbook of Transpersonal Psychiatry and Psychology, Scotton, Chinen & Battista (1996) have brought together scholarly works which deal with the practical, theoretical and ethical implications of transpersonal research and therapy and provide an outline of a wide spectrum of multi-cultural perspectives on mental health. It seems that while there are a few studies about the intersection between psychiatry and spirituality, the term Transpersonal Psychiatry has barely been used
outside the work of Scotton, Chinnen and Battista. Transpersonal psychiatry does not promote any particular belief system, but rather acknowledges that spiritual experiences and transcendent states are universal human experiences, and therefore worthy of rigorous, scientific study (Kasprow & Scotton, 1999). Kasprow and Scotton also write that “Inattention to these experiences and the roles they play in both psychopathology and healing constitutes a common limitation in conventional psychotherapeutic practice and research” (1999, p. 13).

Interestingly, after catapulting the current neurobiological paradigm, thanks to the return of psychedelic drugs to the spotlights of academic research and therapy, we are standing on the verge of yet another paradigm shift in psychiatry. The astonishing advancements that humanity has made during the last 50 years with regard to brain imaging, psychotherapeutic techniques and transpersonal research, has prepared the ground for the upcoming paradigm where psychedelics will take a central part in the treatment of a wide range of “disorders” like PTSD, depression, substance dependency, anxiety related to terminal illness and many more (Schenberg, 2018).

While modern psychology has been studying the therapeutic effect of altered states of consciousness since the days of William James in the beginning of the last century (Ryan, 2008), tribal cultures have been using psychedelic plants as sacramental tools for thousands of years. These plants have shaped the course of many established religions and are still used throughout the world today as part of religious ceremonies for many cultures (Schultes & Hofmann, 1979). In order for the emerging paradigm to bring the required transformation for the modern mental health system, we should take into account the lessons that were learned in the past with regard to therapeutic work with psychedelics. Bravo and Grob (1989) concluded their article “Shamans, Sacraments, and Psychiatrists” with the following lines (p. 127):
“If American psychiatry is to embark on a renewed investigation of the potential therapeutic role of psychedelics, lessons of the traditional shamanic healers must be incorporated as an integral component of such future clinical research”.

During the early 1960s it became apparent that the quality and clinical effectiveness of psychedelic therapy were extremely dependent upon the patient’s constitutional (‘set’) and environmental factors (‘setting’). These factors, also termed extrapharmacological factors, vary considerably between different cultures, and especially between indigenous cultures and modern clinical research. For shamans, spirituality and healing are integrated parts of the same activity and “rituals are used to facilitate and structure the experience so that a focus of concentration allows the mind to enter more deeply into the implicit meaning” (Bravo & Grob, 1989, p. 126).

The skills to be learned in the training of a shaman vary from one society to another, but usually include diagnosis and treatment of illness, supervising rituals, contacting spirits, interpreting dreams and gathering herbs. Since shamanism is based on values of compassion and service, ethical training is a key element in a shaman’s education (Krippner, 2007). Contemporary therapies like behavior therapy, hypnotherapy, drug therapy, psychodrama and dream interpretation share many of the qualities of ancient and modern shamanic methods and practices (Krippner, 2007). “In regard to healing practices,” writes Krippner, “shamans and psychological and
psychiatric therapists demonstrate more similarities than differences” (2007, p. 19). These similarities, and of course the differences between the shamanic and psychological/psychiatric practices are emphasizing the important contribution the psychological study of shamanism (which is an important aspect of transpersonal psychology) has to offer to mental health professionals.

One of the main aspects that distinguish the transpersonal psychiatrist from the transpersonal psychologist is the application of psychopharmacological intervention. While at times medications can impede the patient in processing and integrating his experience (Scotton, Chinen & Battista, 1996), at other instances, psychopharmacological intervention may be necessary in order to prevent any harm to the patient and/or his surroundings and in order to ground the patient so he or she can begin with a psychotherapeutic process (Scotton, Chinen & Battista, 1996). In general, pharmacological intervention should be focused on balancing the level of symptoms, whether they be pain, depression, anxiety, or psychotic states, so that they can be integrated by the person in the service of growth (Scotton, Chinen & Battista, 1996). Every psychopharmacological intervention has side-effects to it, and therefore it is important that these will be minimized at all cost to provide the patient with “the appropriate combination of mental stability and agility” (Scotton, Chinen & Battista, 1996, p. 333). The transpersonal psychopharmacologist must be able to integrate spiritual knowledge and practice with meaningful psychopharmacological intervention, a task that clearly requires the knowledge of when each would be helpful. Actively manic patients (and their surroundings) for example, could be in a great risk without aggressive pharmacotherapy; however, the transpersonal psychiatrist could also introduce them to a specific spiritual practice and discuss the spiritual aspect of their crisis once they have become sufficiently clinically grounded (Scotton, Chinen & Battista, 1996).

Another aspect of psychiatric practice that is distinguished from psychological practice is the heavy responsibility that lies on the psychiatrist’s shoulders, since in the case of a critical incident (a patient hurting himself or someone else for example) “the judgment of society comes down on them like a ton of bricks” (Powell, 2002, p. 7).

Dr. Andrew Powell, a psychiatrist, psychotherapist and the founding chair of the Spirituality and Psychiatry Special Interest Group (SPSIG) of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in the UK, has been actively promoting an open spiritual dialogue, practice and training in the psychiatric community for the last 20 years (Cook, Powell & Sims, 2009). In his article Mental Health and Spirituality Powell is suggesting to get spirituality on the agenda for psychiatrists in training in the UK and to make spiritual enquiry as relevant as taking a family or social history (Powell, 2002). The SPSIG has suggested a revision of the curriculum for the MRCPsych examination to the Royal College of Psychiatrists (Powell, 2002), where they detail the knowledge and skills that are required for the integration of spirituality into psychiatric practice.
Following are some of the major aspects that should be demonstrated by the psychiatrist according to the revised curriculum:

- **Awareness of, and sensitivity to,**
  the spiritual/religious historical development of the patient.

- **Awareness of the patient’s need to**
  find a sense of meaning and purpose in life, his/her personal search
  for answers to deeper questions concerning birth, life and death and
  awareness of the difference between spirituality and religion as well as their inter-relatedness.

- **Knowledge of spiritual crises,**
  meditation, prayer and altered states of consciousness, including Near Death Experiences (NDEs).

- **Knowledge of the spiritual significance**
  of anxiety, doubt, guilt and shame as well as of the spiritual importance of
  love, altruism and forgiveness, and their relation to mental health.

Familiarity with issues related to research, for example:
the application of quantitative and qualitative research
to the field of spirituality and psychiatric practice as well as the contribution of research to understanding the neuro-physiology and efficacy of prayer, meditation, forgiveness and love.

- **Competence in the recognition of his/her own counter-transference responses to**
  spiritual disclosures (Powell, 2002, pp. 10-12)

Another important emphasis Powell (2002, p. 11) makes is that:

Healing begins with the offering of love, a word that doesn’t figure nearly enough in the lexicon of psychiatry. Compassionate love – spirituality in action – can only do good and mixes well with all other treatments that may be required.

Integrating such aspects into modern psychiatric practice are becoming more relevant than ever when taking into account the unique characteristics of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy which is taking a major part in the current paradigm shift in psychiatry (Schenberg, 2018). One of the most intriguing aspects of psychedelic drugs is their ability to enhance meaning (Hartogsohn, 2018). Between two thirds to 86% of those who go through a psychedelic experience in a therapeutic setting consider them to be either one of the five most meaningful and spiritually significant experiences of their lives, or the single most meaningful experience (Hartogsohn, 2018). The ‘Set’ (psychological context) and ‘Setting’ (sociocultural context) of the experience are thus of crucial importance as their impact on the patient’s experience is significantly multiplied by the effects of the drugs (Hartogsohn, 2018).

In conclusion, the current biological paradigm in psychiatry is failing to ease the suffering of hundreds of millions of people. By merging modern psychiatry with transpersonal psychology and ancient as well as modern spiritual practices, we can help create a safe and supportive environment for psychiatric patients and thus greatly contribute to the wellbeing of both patients and psychiatrists in the emerging paradigm. In order to face the challenges of the modern mental health system, we might consider taking an example from tribal cultures where there are several “types” of shamans, and thus pave the way towards the professional establishment of sub-specialties in psychiatry, where transpersonal psychiatrists will work together with the patient towards healing and growth with humbleness, love, and compassion.
References

Nir Tadmor is a psychotherapist in private practice and the co-founder of a psychedelic harm reduction project in Israel called Safe Shore. Since Safe Shore was founded 5 years ago, Nir supported and supervised hundreds of cases of psychedelic crises both in musical events and in private practice. During the last year, Nir co-facilitated 9 weekend workshops on supporting extreme states, where he had the privilege to share the knowledge he has gained in the field with more than 200 people who were interested in acquiring basic psychedelic crisis intervention skills and a deeper understanding of the relationship between mental health and psychedelics. Nir is also an MSc. student in the Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology programme with Alef Trust where his thesis focuses on psycho-spiritual crises induced by the use of psychedelics. Nir is also trained in a mindfulness based psychotherapy called Hakomi and for the last three years has been working as a mental health professional in a center that offers an alternative to psychiatric hospitalization.
On the Relationship Between Cognitive Neuroscience and Spirituality/Religion

Markus Gern
This essay will initially suggest a definition for “sacred science” by establishing what may be understood respectively as sacred and science. Then, it will offer a view into what makes science sacred; also, critically evaluating if a modern “sacred science” is feasible, and if there is already evidence to support such idea. It will also discuss some points of view arguing against sacred science, or positing an approach that would narrow, impoverish, or limit the cooperation and creation between spirituality/religion and science.

Since defining the term “sacred” in modern times is a largely challenging task (Nasr, 2006) and will demand a more elaborate explanation, it is easier to begin with definition of “science”. For that definition, the western standard use of the word will be considered. The Oxford online dictionary (“science”, n.d.) defines science as “1-The intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment.”

In Nasr (2006) we find science defined as “that body of systematic knowledge of nature, combined with mathematics, which grew out of the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century” (p. 208). The British Science Council (“science”, n.d.) offers the following definition on its website: “Science is the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence” (para. 1).

Based on the definitions above, and for the matter of this paper, the term “science” is being considered as the body of systematic knowledge and understanding of nature and society, achieved by observation and experiment using a systematic methodology based on evidence. By defining the term “science,” the first foundation stone has been established, making it possible to tackle the second foundation stone, which is to define the much more complicated and multifaceted term, “sacred”.

When thinking about it, the first topic that comes to mind is “Sacred to whom?” Would Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhist, Folk religionists, and Jews—just to mention the world’s biggest religions (Pew Research Center, 2012)—agree on what sacred is? It should also be taken into account that religious practices vary not only among different religions, but also inside a specific religion, from one practitioner to another. Practices vary significantly depending on several variables such as personality, personal values, social class, climate, and demographics (Whitehouse, 2000; McCauley and Lawson, 2002, as cited in Schjoedt, 2009). Thus, although there are indeed similarities, many religions—as well as different individuals—would diverge regarding their understanding of what is sacred. If this assumption is correct, the idea of one sacred science, embracing all that is considered sacred by all religions, seems to be an essential challenge.

The Oxford online dictionary defines the term “sacred” as:

1. Connected with God or a god or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration.

1.1 Religious rather than secular.

1.2 (of writing or text) embodying the laws or doctrines of a religion.

1.3 Regarded with great respect and reverence by a particular religion, group, or individual.

1.4 Regarded as too valuable to be interfered with; sacrosanct (“sacred”, n.d.).

Other authors defined sacred differently. Hill, Pargament, and Hood (2000) state that sacred “is a socially influenced perception of either some sense of ultimate reality or truth or some divine being/object” (p. 67). Lancaster (2010), while not disputing the definition of Hill et al, suggests that it sets the bar too high. Citing Emmons and Crumpler (1999), Lancaster explains that daily, earthly concerns—or
as he puts it, “seemingly mundane pursuits” (p. 5)—can be considered sacred, including “football, management styles, or environmental concerns” (p. 5). One important notion to sacred is connectedness, as asserted by George, Larson, Koenig, and McCullough (2000). According to the authors, the search to get to the divine, nature, or the ultimate in any way, to realise a sense of meaning or purpose, is key to the idea of sacred.

Thus, the sacred is not only what is related to a god or gods, to main world religions, their specific objects of worship, or particular values and dogmas of these religions. Also, our mundane pursuits can be considered sacred to ourselves, as long we perceive the numinous quality of these personal quests, in the search for connection with the divine, nature or the ultimate.

By defining sacred for the context of this paper, the second foundation stone for this essay is set, and now it is possible to associate both terms, “science” and “sacred”, in one single term again. Based on the two suggested definitions above, I propose to define “sacred science” as the interrelation of science and spirituality/religion. Sacred science is therefore the incorporation into science of spiritual/religious, ontologically-challenging concepts like mind beyond the brain (Lancaster, 2011), and higher or ultimate realities beyond matter. In my opinion, any field of science that uses a scientific approach based on research and evidence, which develops its work by drawing upon spiritual/religious knowledge and wisdom to expand its horizons surpassing the typical materialist approach, can be called sacred.

Supported by the definition above it is possible to relate to some work that has been done in the last couple of years. In the following paragraphs, some examples of such interrelation between science and spirituality/religion will be demonstrated. But, before that, another idea must be shared. In the same way that the multitude of beliefs and understandings, as described earlier, posed a challenge to the definition of the word “sacred,” this diversity also offers an immense opportunity for progress. Spiritual/religious diversity seems to offer a rich environment upon which research and science can rest. There is no need to believe in one all-encompassing world of sacred science.

Possibly, an analogy is the best tool to clarify the point. When building a house, you need a toolset to reach the desired outcome. Each tool has its purpose and helps to get specific work done. It is much easier to nail something to its place using a hammer or a nail gun, instead of utilising a screwdriver or a wire cutter. In the same way that each tool contributes differently to the desired outcome, different forms of spirituality/religion are able to offer different hints or leads, indicating where science can look for further research ideas and answers.

Lancaster (2013) states:

Buddhism has much to say about the minutiae of perception; Kabbalah explores the nature of thought beneath the limen of consciousness; Sufism is rich in its discussions of imagination, and the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism details the propensity of mind to split reality into subjects and objects (p. 230).

Different recent researchers applied the insight offered by spirituality/religion in different ways and with different goals. Peres, Moreira-Almeida, and Koenig (2007), for example, focused on the therapeutic, healing aspect, looking into trauma treatment. Lancaster (1997), on the other hand, endeavoured through a more analytical aspect of the interrelation, exploring the features, capabilities, and perception-processing of the mind.

The third example for the cooperation between science and spirituality/religion comes from research about the effects of meditation and awareness exercises on the psyche and body. Chiesa and Serretti (2010), for example, demonstrate that meditation and awareness exercises increased specific brain activities (alpha and theta), and had a possible positive influence on mental and physical health. The interesting thing about this particular research is that
it combines both aspects of the studies mentioned above. It analyses the functioning of the brain during meditation to learn more about how the brain works, and at the same time evaluates the effect on the mind and body for treatment and healing.

As already mentioned, Peres et al. (2007) studied the benefits of religion in trauma treatment, based on neuroimaging and research analysis, showing a “low activation of the ... hippocampus” (p. 345) among other important brain areas. They suggest that “the hippocampus 'creates' a cognitive map so that events may be categorized and data connected with other autobiographical information, thus playing a fundamental role in the process of synthesizing, integrating, learning, and evaluating experiences” (p. 345). A lower activation of the hippocampus may be related to continuous dissociation and erroneous interpretation of traumatic events (Gilbertson et al., 2002, as cited in Peres et al., 2007).

Peres et al. (2007) posit that “spirituality and religiosity may also be cornerstones in reframing perception and constituting behaviour” (p. 346). They also support the notion that higher levels of religious involvement are related to better life quality and mental health, as well as to better physical and mental outcomes in patients, thus indicating that the cooperative work of religion and science is not only possible, but can also improve health and life quality in traumatised persons.

While Peres et al. (2007), looked into a possible common ground between science and religion to assist trauma treatment improving health and life quality, Lancaster (1997) examined the stages of perception and memory fixation based on the empirical findings of Abhidhamma Buddhism (which focuses on the analytical doctrine of mental faculties and elements), looking to establish “possible psychological and neurophysiological correspondences” (p. 122). According to the same author, Abhidhamma Buddhism establishes 17 stages towards perception, which could offer a deeper understanding of how memories are created in the brain.

Lancaster (1997) explains that, aligned with the Abhidhamma teachings, in his model, the “I” is ephemeral and has no intrinsic continuity. While demonstrating the different consciousness stages of the Abhidhamma teachings, Lancaster shows how this knowledge can be correlated to recent findings in perceptual processing. The relevant topic for this discussion is that Lancaster builds with his hypothesis a feasible and reliable base for the cooperation of religion and science, showing that collaboration is possible and realistic.

Another example of the interrelation between science and spirituality/religion is the research of the effects of meditation and awareness exercises on the brain. Chiesa and Serretti (2010) demonstrated through electroencephalographic (EEG) studies a “significant increase in alpha and theta activity during meditation” (p. 1), as well as possible positive results on mental and physical health. According to the authors, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) has shown efficacy for many psychiatric and physical conditions and also for healthy subjects, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is mainly efficacious in reducing relapses of depression in patients with three or more episodes, Zen meditation significantly reduces blood pressure and Vipassana meditation shows efficacy in reducing alcohol and substance abuse in prisoners. (Chiesa & Serretti, p. 1)
Other similar studies also came to positive results. Cramer, Lauche, Paul, and Dobos (2012) assert that there is some evidence that supports the effectiveness of meditation and MBSR on breast cancer treatment. Galante, Iribarren, and Pearce (2013) showed, based on 11 studies, that MBSR was effective in reducing depression relapse and anxiety. Khoury et al. (2013) stated, “MBT (Mindfulness Based Therapy) is an effective treatment for a variety of psychological problems, and is especially effective for reducing anxiety, depression, and stress” (p. 763).

The benefits of joining science and spirituality/religion seem to be evident, explicit and the creation of a contemporary sacred science seems to make perfect sense. Nevertheless, some points of view and arguments should be addressed to obtain a better and more balanced understanding of the matter.

One important topic mentioned by Lancaster (2011) is the risk of oversimplifying religious experiences to fit them into the prevailing scientific worldview. Lancaster argues, “We should not be approaching spiritual teachings and practices merely to fit them into the explanatory categories that are currently de rigueur in neuroscience and psychology” (p. 230). He continues asserting that, by doing so, there may be a risk of impoverishment, since not all complexity of spiritual and mystical traditions can be encompassed by modern science, leading to the loss of insights that might arise from religious experience. As a possible solution, Lancaster suggests broadening the conversation between science and religion, to encompass “some of the ontologically more challenging concepts” (p. 229) as mind beyond the brain, and “higher” or “ultimate” realities.

Also on the religious side, we have authors that contest the possibility of cooperation between science and spirituality. Nasr (2006) apparently argues in favour of the collaboration by stating that “the subject of the relation between religion and science...remains for other reasons of paramount importance” (p. 207). But further in his paper, he limits the participation of such collaboration to long-established religions, stating “In this present discussion, therefore, we shall define spirituality as the inner, spiritual dimension of traditional religions” (p. 209). With this, he excludes important spiritual practices such as shamanism or spiritism, and all other spiritual traditions, which are equally important and valid. This position, as already postulated above by Lancaster (2011), offers a risk of possibly impoverishing the results of the collaboration that could be obtained between science and spirituality/religion. Again, the solution lies in broadening the perspectives whilst discussing more ontologically challenging topics. In order to achieve this outcome, each interested party should be open to new concepts and accept widening their boundaries in the pursuit of moving forward and creating a modern Sacred Science.

The issues mentioned above represent a potential risk, but already accept the possibility of cooperation between science and religion, leaving at least some
space to look for common ground. A more significant challenge comes from hardcore materialistic scientists. Some scientists don’t think that this cooperation is even possible, based on the belief that the mind and consciousness are products of the brain. Klink, Self, Lamme, and Roelfsema (2015) maintain that “most researchers will agree that consciousness is a (neuro) biological phenomenon and that the mechanisms which give rise to consciousness will have to be located in the brain.” (p. 1).

Hinterberger (2015) echoes that this worldview is often accepted, by stating “consciousness is frequently regarded as neuronally generated” (p. 144). Lamme (2006), in turn, claims that genuine progress can only be achieved by moving the notion of mind towards that of the brain. He asserts that “what seems necessary for conscious experience is that neurons in visual areas engage in so-called recurrent (or re-entrant or resonant) processing” (p. 494). Subscribing to the same point of view, in an interview for ABC News, Dr. Steven Novella categorically stated that “the mainstream scientific community is pretty well-established that the mind is a manifestation of the brain” (ABC News, 2008).

Although there is value to this kind of approach, since it helps to understand the mechanics of how the brain works, among other things, the materialistic stance ignores empirical evidence as well as several papers from different authors that demonstrate the mind or consciousness is not a product of the brain. Greyson (2015), for example, while working with Near-Death Experiences (NDEs), recorded how the patients that had an NDE reported vivid experiences, clear memory, and mental clarity, even while being considered clinically dead, thus directly challenging the idea that the mind and consciousness are products of the brain.

Out of Body Experiences (OBEs) also defy scientific materialism. An OBE can be defined as an “experience of consciousness, or self-awareness floating out of (or sometimes simply being independent of) the physical body” (Nicholls, 2016, p. 100). De Foe (2016) collected the opinion of several authors who have written about OBE, including Robert Peterson, Preston Dennett, Graham Nicholls, and Jurgen Ziewe, arguing that OBEs are real. Here, again, the aforementioned literature challenges the materialistic science by bringing several pieces of evidence that the mind and consciousness are not a sheer result of the brain and it functions.

Furthermore, many representative world religions, in different cultures, (Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, some lines of Judaism, spiritism, and shamanism, for example) believe in reincarnation (“Reincarnation”, 2018). The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines reincarnation as follows: “also called transmigration or metempsychosis, in religion and philosophy, rebirth of the aspect of an individual that persists after bodily death.” (“Reincarnation”, n.d.). Mills, Haraldsson, and Keil (1994) found that 80% of the children interviewed in their study had accurate and provable memories of past lives. Thus, if reincarnation is real and provides some form of self-awareness or consciousness that outlasts physical death, once again, it would indicate that the mind and consciousness are not a product of the brain.

From the arguments shown above, it is clear that cooperation between religion and science is not only possible, but also desirable. There is no denial that there are challenges that will have to be surpassed in such an endeavour, but modern science is apparently growing beyond its limiting 17th century materialistic boundaries, using, for example, theories from quantum physics to argue that consciousness goes beyond the brain (Schwartz, Stapp, and Beauregard, 2005). It is also evident to me that science and spiritually have a lot to offer and, at the same time, both can profit from each other. Thus, there is a real chance for science and spirituality/religion to grow and support each other, because in the end, they seem to have a least one encompassing common goal: to make life on Earth more pleasurable and worth living.
References


Markus Gern is an MSc student at Alef Trust for Consciousness, Spirituality & Transpersonal Psychology and completed his prior studies in Business Administration and Simultaneous Interpreting in São Paulo, Brazil. He was born in São Paulo, Brazil in 1974, attended the German school Humboldt and later the Universities FAAP and PUC. Markus has achieved the master degree in Reiki and is a 1st grade black belt in Aikido and loves to watch TV series. He is married, has no children (yet), and lives with his wife and his dog in São Paulo, Brazil.
Transcendence and Integration

The Role of Non-Ordinary States of Consciousness in Transpersonal Coaching

Bonnie Bright, Ph.D.

Waking up is the adventure of consciousness, paths beyond ego are the means for the adventure, and the transpersonal vision is its guiding light.


In modern times, humans have lost connection with their spiritual roots, and this loss of connection creates suffering. If we regularly fail to experience ourselves as part of a bigger whole that sustains us, we can lapse into depression, distress, dissociation, or other states that enable us to cope with our sense of separation and dis-ease in the world (Jung, 1961/1989). Swiss psychiatrist, C. G. Jung, whose work formed some of the foundations of depth and transpersonal psychologies, believed our connection to something that is larger than our everyday sense of self is critical. He wrote,

The decisive question for man is: Is he related to something infinite or not? That is the telling question
of his life. Only if we know that the thing which truly matters is the infinite can we avoid fixing our interests upon futilities, and upon all kinds of goals which are not of real importance (Jung, 1961/1989, pp. 356-7).

Transpersonal psychology operates on the premise that human beings are inherently spiritual beings (Walsh and Vaughan, 1993). Transpersonal scholars differentiate between religion and spirituality, suggesting that spirituality involves “an experientially grounded sense of connection with, or participatory consciousness of, the “sacred,” “transcendent,” “numinous” or “some form of higher power or intelligence” (Elkins, 1990; MacDonald, 2009, p. 87). Fostering this sense of connection with what we recognize as “spiritual” can make us feel happier and give us a greater sense of meaning. Indeed, a study published in the Journal of Happiness Studies, which defined spirituality as “one’s sense of meaning or purpose in life or one’s sense of connectedness to the sacred or divine” (para. 16), found that people who feel that their lives have meaning and value and who develop deep, quality relationships—both measures of spirituality—are happier. Personal aspects of spirituality (meaning and value in one’s own life) and communal aspect (quality and depth of interpersonal relationships) were both strong predictors of happiness. (“Spirituality, Not Religion, Makes Kids Happy,” 2009, para 2-3)

Jung placed significant importance on the numinous in his work, adopting the term first used by theologian Rudolf Otto to refer to “experiences originating on deeper levels of the psyche, in the collective unconscious” (Grof, 2015, p. 113) from theologian Rudolf Otto. Jung (1973) insisted:

The main interest of my work is not concerned with the treatment of neurosis but rather with the approach to the numinous.... the approach to the numinous is the real therapy and inasmuch as you attain to the numinous experiences you are released from the curse of pathology (p. 377).

In this essay, I will investigate how transpersonal psychology values spirituality and seeks to make connections to it through accessing non-ordinary states of consciousness (NOSCs), also variously called altered states of consciousness, extraordinary states of consciousness, mystical states, or holotropic states (the latter a word that suggests states which are oriented toward wholeness). These states can enhance our capacity to feel connected to something sacred, to transcend limitations, and to recover and re-integrate the lost parts of ourselves (Grof, 2000a).

Transpersonal psychology is interested in a sub-group of NOSCs that “have heuristic, healing, transformative, and even evolutionary potential” (Grof and Grof, 1989). Such states may include (but not be limited to) meditation, yoga, tai chi, dance, drumming, chanting, dream work, making art, and active imagination, a process developed by Jung (Lasley, Kellogg, Michaels, & Brown, 2015). The innovative praxis of Holotropic Breathwork, a technique co-created by transpersonal pioneer, Stanislav Grof, and his wife, Christina (2010), and the ritual exploration of psychedelics, can each also initiate powerful non-ordinary states of consciousness and lend new opportunities to find one’s own sense of spirituality in everyday life. It is often the “direct experiential contact with the archetypal dimensions of reality” that emerge in non-ordinary states, maintains Grof (2000b, p. 4).

However, NOSCs can lead to unexpected outcomes (Lukoff, 2007). While it is reasonable to assume that consciously entering extraordinary states may ultimately lead to spiritual emergence or evolution, sometimes something spiritual happens that dramatically impacts or deluges one’s ego so much that they no longer have a frame of reference or context by which to hold the new information. In such cases, spiritual emergence can evolve into a “spiritual emergency,” a term coined by Grof (1989) to describe how a natural process of unfolding can, in certain situations, become “chaotic and overwhelming” as old identities break down and previously held beliefs and systems disintegrate, resulting in anxiety and difficulties coping with life as it existed before. Grof (1989) admits spiritual emergency can be perceived.
as a crisis, but insists that it also offers the potential for transforming to a higher state of spiritual awareness.

Finally, this essay will examine how transpersonal coaches can use NOSCs as a powerful tool, especially via the process known as Open Awareness. Open Awareness, developed by Jevon Dangeli (2018b), enables clients to experience expanded consciousness in order to identify and transcend limitations, to seek new perspectives, and to integrate spiritual experiences that emerge from NOSCs. “Exploration with Holotropic states has impact on the totality of our being and our lives on physical, mental, emotional, environmental and spiritual levels,” writes Mireya Alacet (2017), a psychotherapist and Grof-certified Holotropic breathworker. “Giving attention to integration offers the potential to enrich our life experience by allowing us to digest, embody and apply to our daily lives the insights and lessons learned while doing in-depth exploratory work” (para.2).

“Anyone who has ever struggled with a sense of meaninglessness, limitation, hopelessness, or despair may encounter profound transformation when they access expanded states of awareness, providing new perspectives that effectively change their worldview.”

Grof (1989) suggests the term “spiritual” is one which, in addition to its broad meaning generally associated with religion, also encompasses all states of awareness, and all higher values toward which we commonly strive, such as altruism, aestheticism, and humanitarianism.

Anyone who has ever struggled with a sense of meaninglessness, limitation, hopelessness, or despair may encounter profound transformation when they access expanded states of awareness, providing new perspectives that effectively change their worldview (Dangeli, 2018b). Such spiritual encounters often help people recognize that they are part of a larger whole, and the “I” they thought they were is not, in fact, the full story. In his theory of psychosynthesis, one significant contributor to the field of transpersonal psychology, Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli (1888-1974) suggests each of us must go through psycho-spiritual processes that ultimately deliver us to a place of Self-realization in which the “I” that is the ego-self begins to identify with the Transpersonal Self (in S. Grof & Grof, 1989).

While the origins of transpersonal psychology initially focused on trying to understand what Abraham Maslow called “peak” experiences of already-healthy people (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993), it has developed into a much broader field which interests itself in subjective conscious experience; mind-body healing; religious experience; spiritual development; mystical or exceptional human experiences; psychic phenomena; shamanic states; and “unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness” (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992, p. 91). “A key emphasis of transpersonal psychology is integrating spirituality into the more rational, scientific worldview commonly held in contemporary society,” Grof (2012) asserts. Maslow (“Chapter 1: Introduction to transpersonal psychology,”) one of several individuals credited with the founding of transpersonal psychology, offered 35 different situations in which transcendence could be significant, including transcending weaknesses, negative emotions, individual differences, everyday limits and shortcomings, and beliefs and expectations of others.

Allowing oneself to surrender to a spiritual sense of self in the face of a culture where reason...
and rational thought prevail means tapping into resources that are often beyond our scope of recognition. Transpersonal approaches to coaching, therefore, benefit clients by helping them access those transcendent states that empower them to create significant change. And, even though a sense of spirituality can provide meaning and context that allow individuals to excel, contemporary psychologies have not traditionally acknowledged, accepted, or integrated spirituality into their approaches. Grof (2008) laments the exclusion of spirituality in modern society, writing:

On the individual level, the toll for the loss of spirituality is an impoverished, alienated, and unfulfilling way of life and an increase of emotional and psychosomatic disorders. On the collective level, the absence of spiritual values leads to strategies of existence that threaten the survival of life on our planet, such as plundering of nonrenewable resources, polluting the natural environment, disturbing ecological balance, and using violence as a principal means of international problem-solving. (para. 7)

When any individual begins to contemplate their place in the larger context of things, he or she begins to gain a meaningful perspective on how a sense of relationship with the spiritual can expand horizons, transcend limitations, integrate disparate experiences, and re-organize priorities so that joy, acceptance, and love can flow unfettered in their lives.

A sense of the spiritual often accompanies transpersonal or mystical experiences. Direct experience of the “transcendent divine” can have a transformative impact on individuals who struggle with relationships, emotional disorders, and various other neuroses and pathologies, asserts Grof (1990, p. 41). By introducing transpersonal methodologies into psychotherapy or coaching psychology, transpersonal coaches can help patients and clients seek peak experiences, in which egoic limitations soften, perceptions shift, and people engage with something bigger than the ego self to access greater wisdom, clarity, creativity, and insights.

Transpersonal researcher Steve Taylor (2012) describes what Maslow and others have called peak, spiritual, or mystical experiences as “awakening experiences,” and defines them as events during which our state of being, our vision of the world, and our relationship to it are transformed, bringing a sense of clarity, revelation, and well-being in which we become aware of a deeper (or higher) level of reality, perceive a sense of harmony and meaning, and transcend our normal sense of separateness from the world (p. 74).

One way peak experiences can come about is through entering altered states of consciousness (ASC), also referred to as non-ordinary states of consciousness (NOSC). These states can be instigated by such processes as music, dancing, fasting, prayer, ritual, and psychedelics, among other a vast number of other catalysts—processes Grof (2000b) has referred to as “technologies of the sacred” (p. 4). Ralph Metzner defines an ASC (or NOSC) as “a change in thinking, feeling, and perception, in relation to one’s ordinary, baseline consciousness” (cited in Peres, Simão, & Nasello, 2007).

NOSCs give us the possibility of expanding our vision beyond our ongoing, often long-term beliefs and ways of seeing the world, which we acquired through conditioning or enculturation. “The hallmark of mystical experience is a stepping out of one’s self, of joining with something beyond or outside one’s normal ego boundaries,” write medical doctors, Mark Kasprow and Bruce Scotton (1999, p. 15).

But is a sense of connection to the sacred enough for modern humans to access transformation? How can communion with something larger than our everyday ego selves be applicable in everyday life? “Let us examine whether and how it’s possible to solve this central problem of human life, to heal this fundamental infirmity of man,” urged Assagioli (1959). “Let us see how he may free himself from this enslavement and achieve an harmonious inner integration, true Self-realization and right relationships with others” (p. 7). While Assagioli admits that it is a difficult undertaking, he suggests it is possible by attending to the following:
“1) Knowledge of one’s personality; 2) Control of its various elements; 3) Realization of one’s true Self—the discovery or creation of a unifying center; and 4) Psychosynthesis: the formation or reconstruction of the personality around the new center” (p. 8).

Accessing NOSCs for the purpose of healing may be one of the most ancient techniques in history, and such states have been used by shamans for millennia (Eliade, 1974; Walsh, 2007). When such states are put to therapeutic use, they can enable access to “levels of the psyche that are often unavailable through exclusively rational or cognitive approaches,” (Kasprow & Scotton, 1999, p. 21).

However, while NOSCs appear to offer access to expanded states of consciousness beyond our limited egoic understanding and allow us to step out of ourselves, they may also initiate potential challenges because they can result in spiritual emergency. In my own life, I experienced a profound spiritual emergency over a decade ago when my first experience of Grof’s Holotropic Breathwork initiated a kundalini awakening and an ensuing shift in my worldview that seemed impossible to reconcile with what I had known before. While this spontaneous experience carried with it a powerful positive experience of transcending my personal egoic boundaries and offering me a felt sense of essential divine being-ness, once it was over, I found it virtually impossible to resume my subsequent activities in life without any kind of framework or context for what had happened to me.

In retrospect, it would have been helpful for me to have had access to transpersonal coaching in the aftermath of my experience. Transpersonal Coaching Psychology can be valuable in the process of identifying transpersonal states, and in assessing how they can lead to positive change. Like other transpersonal interventions, the aim of coaching is to “actively move clients towards an enhanced level of spiritual awareness and a fuller realization of his/her ultimate potential” (Dangeli, 2018b, p. 74). However, it can also be beneficial in “detecting and dealing with psycho-spiritual crises,” as was my case, and it “can be of value for the purpose of transforming a crisis
Thus, transpersonal coaching provides opportunities for both transcendence (of egoic limitations, negative emotions, and shortcomings, among issues) and for integration of disparate experiences, including, perhaps surprisingly, those stemming from other NOSCs, as well as those often-spontaneous experiences that sometimes result spiritual emergency. In my experience, my spiritual emergency led me to seek opportunities for many additional non-ordinary states, which led to a multitude of very intense peak experiences over the course of many years as I endeavored to make sense of what had occurred for me.

However, merely accessing NOSCs does not always serve an individual to the fullest extent because, if she moves too quickly and doesn’t have a support system by which she can integrate one experience after another, the new incoming content simply can’t be parsed efficiently enough for the individual to make sense of it and apply it in daily life. For some, it can also undoubtedly result in spiritual bypass, a process during which some individuals become addicted to the transcendent experience itself, moving from one to the next in search of yet another peak experience, without ever making the time or effort to do the work to process the ones that came before in order to glean the inherent value they offer (Metzner, 2017, p. 303).

Since I personally never effectively managed to identify a process by which I could unpack the dramatic experience I had and to better understand it, I recognize now that seeking transpersonal coaching might have provided both the container and the tools I needed in order to integrate the multitude (and magnitude) of spiritual experiences that I encountered over many years. Had I managed to work the experience in this way, it could have potentially helped me to transcend the limiting beliefs and negative emotions that seemed to bubble to the surface in the aftermath of the event, while instead I just had to do my best to hang on for what felt like a wild ride.

The process of Open Awareness, in particular, is a potent tool for coaches to lead clients gently into a NOSC through which they can gain new perspective and insights through felt sense and through intuition. Open awareness has been described as a “core skill” in transpersonal coaching. By nature, it is a “flexible, fluid, and dynamic state” (Dangeli & Geldenhuys, 2018b, pp. 38-39) which can give rise to a reframe of the way in which one is experiencing themselves in a given moment. It can also enable new perceptions which help us make meaning, often leading to an increased sense of interconnection and compassion.

More than just a “mindful” way of perceiving, open awareness relies on receptivity, and on both introspective and extrospective awareness—especially the balancing of one’s immediate conscious awareness and peripheral sensory awareness. This opens an individual to the “space between,” the energetic field between an individual and objects or people around her (including the invisible dynamic field between coach and client), effectively softening self/other boundaries. Perceiving this dynamic field deepens our intuition, allowing the attentive coach to pick up important information from subtle clues in her client’s body language, facial expressions, etc. (Dangeli & Geldenhuys, 2018b). In my experience, I also find I notice language, expressions, or wordplays that seem pregnant with meaning in the moment.

Not only does it contribute to a sense of interconnectedness, open awareness is particularly valuable for coaches in the critical role of holding the space for clients because it fosters a greater sense of resonance and rapport; of compassion and empathy from the coach, and a feeling of “participatory vision.” In other words, it helps clients to “feel felt” (Dangeli, 2018), and allows coaches to “become available at several levels simultaneously” (Friedman & Hartelius, 2013, p. 582). It also serves to “open the aperture” of awareness for both coaches and clients, allowing them to emerge from the “tunnel awareness,” a limited perception of one’s self that can be so detrimental to understanding, and growth (Dangeli, 2018a).

Having witnessed and experienced Open Awareness in action, I have been struck by how valuable it can be in the process of integration. Using Open Awareness, not only can we engage with some of the lost,
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frozen, or split off parts of ourselves that are commonly described in terms of response to trauma or as soul loss, we can begin to introduce them back into the greater whole of our being. Further, I see Open Awareness as a powerful and innovative tool not just for those who have experienced spiritual emergency, but also for those who have had intense and powerful experiences during NOSCs. The capacity for a transpersonal coach to create a space in which, through Open Awareness, the client is able to revisit some of the events, images, symbols, and emotions that arise in NOSCs and to regard them with an expanded view, new insights and understandings can very quickly arise.

Those new insights can help an individual who may have felt overwhelmed, mystified, frightened, or frustrated by her experience during a NOSC to begin to place the material in context, and to make connections with other elements or themes, so she can begin to see how they relate to one another, and her to them. Having access to this emerging spiritual perspective can empower the client to discover how things “fit”, thereby integrating them into her burgeoning and expanding world view.

Having sought out my own fair share of NOSCs over the years, I believe this sort of integration process could be tremendously valuable for the experiencer who has, more often than not, encountered potent transformational archetypal themes in the NOSCs which she deliberately sought out. When I looked up the etymology of the word “integrate,” I learned it means “to render (something) whole, bring together the parts of,” (integrate. (n.d.), one of the fundamental goals for transpersonal psychologies. However, Open Awareness is vastly underutilized as a tool for regular and meaningful integration of peak experiences. While indeed some facilitators who offer technologies of the sacred make some degree of effort to help participants integrate their experiences, they simply don’t go far enough to create a container or process which continues to support the continued unfolding that is bound to happen.

Grof’s Holotropic Breathwork process, for example, recognizes the value of having breathers create Mandalas and participate in sharing circles after each breathwork session, but I have found that once the workshop ends, the participant is left on her own to find ways to continue working with the material in deliberate and meaningful ways. If the participant had easy access to a transpersonal coach who could continue to explore her experience with her over time, I feel certain that she would gain far more understanding from the original event, perhaps enabling her to transcend some of the difficult themes and issues much more quickly and easily.

Similarly, if I had personally uncovered the option to use transpersonal tools and techniques such as Open Awareness to work with the emotions, events, and images stemming from the NOSC that led to my own spiritual emergency all those years ago, perhaps I would have been able to accept it and integrate it into my life sooner, minimizing and reducing the amount of suffering that invariably accompanied it because I simply couldn’t find a way to make sense of it for so long.

The same would be true for psychedelic experiences, perhaps to an even greater degree. As with Holotropic Breathwork, while some practitioners who offer psychedelic experiences in sacred ceremony manage.

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In conclusion, in this essay, I have explored how transpersonal psychology emphasizes the value of spirituality, and adopts methods for accessing non-ordinary states of consciousness (NOSCs) that can provide a way for each of us to access our own inherent spirituality. Non-ordinary states of consciousness often generate direct experiences, encounters with archetypes and symbols, and access to emotions, insights, and understandings that can ultimately enhance our capacity to feel connected to something larger than ourselves. These newfound context and fresh perspectives move us beyond our limitations toward new potentialities, and they help integrate the various, disparate parts of ourselves and our experiences in order to render us more whole. Through a sense of understanding our interconnection with each other and the world around us, we gain context for our own lives and struggles, and we can begin to make meaning.

When those same non-ordinary states gift us with powerful images, stirring emotions, and a window into the Great Mystery, we need a process by which we...
can work with the material that came up for us, to gain insights, and then apply them into our everyday lives. Only in this way can we truly absorb and implement the profound learnings and healing that is offered through these extraordinary experiences.

Open awareness is a process by which transpersonal counselors and coaches help themselves and their patients and clients enter into a non-ordinary state that empowers them to expand their perspectives, enhance intuition, and perceive new ways of doing things, all leading them to make shifts that feed and nourish their process of transformation (Dangeli & Geldenhuys, 2018). In the transpersonal coaching process in particular, coaches create a container for their client in which the work can take place, and then hold the liminal space which allows the clients own inner wisdom to elucidate the situation and generate healing and transformation.

Open awareness, practiced by a compassionate, knowledgeable and experienced transpersonal coach, can create a valuable ongoing vehicle for clients to continue working with specific powerful peak experiences gained via non-ordinary states of consciousness, including Grof’s Holotropic Breathwork, psychedelic experiences, and spontaneous experiences that have resulted in spiritual emergency, among others. In this way, they can continue to make meaning of the experience and apply its teachings into everyday life. I certainly believe I personally would have benefitted immensely by having worked the material stemming from my own experience of spiritual emergency with a transpersonal coach. Perhaps it’s never too late to begin.

References


Bonnie Bright, Ph.D. is a Transpersonal Soul-Centered Coach, certified via Alef Trust and Middlesex University. She is also the founder and Director Emerita of Depth Psychology Alliance™. She earned M.A. degrees in Psychology and in Depth Psychology, before completing her doctorate at Pacifica Graduate Institute. She has trained extensively in the Enneagram; in Holotropic Breathwork™; and in indigenous and shamanic practices, including a 2-year training with African elder Malidoma Somé. She is a certified Archetypal Pattern Analyst™ via the Assisi Institute. Bonnie serves on the Advisory Board for Climate Psychology Alliance-North America, and has taught Transpersonal Psychology to grad students for Alef Trust. She created and served as the Executive Editor of Depth Insights scholarly journal for six years, and frequently hosts depth psychology-oriented interviews. She specializes in helping clients with spiritual emergence/emergency, psychedelic integration, and working with non-ordinary states of consciousness.

Find her work at www.depthinsights.com
Enlightenment vs Endarkenment: A False Dichotomy?

Martha Sneyd
Enlightenment means different things to different people, depending on cultural context, lived experiences, spiritual development and core beliefs about the nature of reality. For some it is a holy state reserved only for the few; to others it is humankind’s birth right, a natural freedom that everyone can access with a simple shift in perspective. For many, the notion of enlightenment falls somewhere in between the two views outlined above, representing a transformed state of being, requiring constant learning, integration, and humility, in its continual unfolding to new depths. One of the main concerns within the field of Transpersonal Psychology is the nature of human transformation. In the 1995 “Beyond the Brain” conference, Charles Tart gave a talk entitled “Enlightenment, Altered States and Endarkenment.” This essay asks to what extent the neologism “endarkenment,” presented by Tart (1995), forms a valid dichotomy to enlightenment, and in what ways it impacts the question of how profound human transformation occurs.

While the breadth of this question could easily encompass a dissertation, a necessarily focused approach is taken, different to that of Tart (1995), who, in his lecture, sketched broad definitions and explored the general dynamics of both concepts in relation to Buddhism, Western psychology, and cognitive science. Instead, an interpretation of the dichotomy shaped by my own experiences of acute psychological turmoil is considered. Induced by the plant medicine, ayahuasca, and manifested as hypermania, these experiences led me through an intense initiation with unconscious aspects of myself. One of the central themes developed through this essay is therefore the notion of “endarkenment” as the loss of sanity, and how this relates to the ambivalent relationship between mystical experiences and psychotic symptoms that are viewed as dichotomous by mental health services in Western civilization (Lukoff, Philips & Stone, 2009, p. 61).

As stated above, the argument to follow is very much shaped from first person experience, an approach found in several Transpersonal research methods including Heuristic and Intuitive inquiry and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. However, it is also contained within a framework of three interpenetrating concepts related to the nature of polarity, drawn from ancient Greek philosophy, Jungian thought, and Zen literature. The objective of this piece is to explore the ways in which these concepts interact with the axis line constructed by Tart (1995), my own experiences of travelling back and forth along this line, and the ethical issues surrounding cultural constructions of psychological crisis and transformation.

The basis of this argument’s conceptual framework involves the imagined axis line between two opposites bending into a circle, so that one end meets the other, as depicted in the Ancient Egyptian symbol of the ouroboros, showing a serpent biting its tail, also symbolising infinity. This visual modification of polarity from linear to circular enables a clearer understanding of ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus’ aphorism: “The way up and the way down are one and the same” (cited in Watts, 1963, p. 52). Heraclitus was first to articulate the concept of enantiodromia—a Greek word understood in this context as the extreme of one thing leading to its opposite. The dynamic of enantiodromia is the central philosophical direction of this argument, but is closely related to a second psychological component: Jung’s transcendent function, an operation of the psyche arising from “the union of conscious and unconscious contents” (Jung, cited in Curtis, 2016, p. 13). These ideas, expressing the inherent tension between opposites, become central to the argument when contextualised within the domain of human transformation and applied to the dichotomy of enlightenment versus endarkenment.

Before proceeding in this direction, a third and final element to the framework derived from Zen literature illustrates the slippery terrain of the spiritual journey and offers advice on sound navigation of it:

“A tenth of an inch’s difference,
And heaven and earth are set apart;
If you wish to see it before your own eyes,
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Have no fixed thoughts either for or against it." (cited in Humphreys, 1971, p. 46)

Originating from the Hsin Hsin Ming (On Trust in the Heart) by fifth century Zen master Seng-Ts’an, (in Humphreys, 1971), this verse points to the close proximity of heaven and earth which are taken in this context to indicate enlightenment and its opposite. With a linear understanding of polarity, this stanza makes little sense, yet corresponds perfectly to the circular depiction outlined above where opposite ends are in fact closely connected. The recommended attitude for travel along this route, according to Seng Ts’an, is one of neither grasping at enlightenment nor resisting endarkenment. A complementary addition that helps to clarify this teaching is the series of the traditional Zen Ox-herding pictures that depict the progress of practice from delusion to enlightenment in the form of a man taming a wild ox. As Joko Beck astutely observed: “People want to jump from one to ten. But we can be at nine and slip right back to two. Advances are not always permanent and solid” (1997, p. 37).

My personal experiences of travelling along the spiritual axis line, and the challenging lessons that were learned, very much reflect the ideas depicted in the above framework. Having under a year’s meditation experience before taking ayahuasca, I had not even begun developing what Evelyn Underhill (1955) described in her seminal book, Mysticism, as a “conscious relation with the Absolute” (cited in Wapnick, 1969, p. 51) – understood as a steady process that enables one to swim rather than drown in the mystic waters. My inexperience and earnest attitude became unintentionally reckless, as a longing for complete ego annihilation and a striving for enlightenment took over. It could be said that this was an extreme approach to spiritual growth, which resulted in an equally extreme experience. After an overwhelming immersion in Nirvana that lasted several days, I began to lose touch with reality. The unravelling of my mind, although temporary, was to disrupt my life for the next two years. Using the concept of enantiodromia, the idea of one thing leading to its opposite, as a tool to dig deeper into my descent into the dark not only reveals the esoteric architecture of the experience, but furthers enriches the transpersonal discussion of psychosis.

The proximity between states of ecstatic illumination and madness have been associated since the beginning of recorded history (Lukoff & Lu, 2005, cited in Lukoff et al., 2009, p. 61). Positioning the two as dichotomous while holding a circular understanding of dichotomy or polarity, where both ends meet, one is able to apply the concept of enantiodromia as a way to interpret the ambivalent dynamics between mystical experience and psychosis. This argument avoids the extreme perspectives of Freud who suggested that all mystics have a form of schizophrenia (1961), and RD Laing’s assertion that schizophrenia is a desirable experience (1965).

The introduction of the term spiritual emergency on the part of Stanislav and Cristina Grof in their book, The Stormy Search for the Self (1990) marked an important progression, pointing to the transformational processes often at work. However, the developments it initiated within the field of transpersonal psychology from key figures like Roberto Assagioli, Ken Wilber, and many others, attempted to neatly separate symptoms of psychosis from transformational crisis (Williams, 2012). These clean distinctions do not correlate with my own experience, or with research conducted by Jackson (2001), who collated a table of the proposed distinctions and similarities before transposing data from several case studies onto the table, discovering that the transformative lived experiences of almost every participant could not be neatly divided into the category of either psychotic or spiritual emergency. In addition, in an attempt to filter out what is transformational from what is deemed simply mad, the term spiritual emergency implies a superior value to processes that tick certain boxes, sanitizing them from mental illness while confounding the existing stigma.

Perry (1990), Clarke (2010) and Williams (2012) all present more nuanced interpretations of psychosis as a degenerative phase in what is essentially a
“The distorted and deformed perspectives created by psychosis contain within them a seed of potential through their unflinching illumination of shadow material.”

regenerative process of the psyche: a self-healing mechanism initiated by the unconscious that, if allowed to resolve itself and be followed with an integration process, can result in psycho-spiritual rebirth. To understand more fully how this transformation from extreme states to stabilised peace and wellbeing can occur, it is helpful to draw on the Jungian concept of the transcendent function. Carl Gustav Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist who helped establish the field of psychology, experienced a period of psychosis himself, and formulated the term as central to his psychology of individuation, which could be likened to enlightenment.

Jung (1966) defined the transcendent function as “coming to terms with the unconscious” (p. 121), involving “both action and suffering” (p. 121). It is through holding the uncomfortable tension between the contents of the deep unconscious, opposing the ideas and beliefs of the ego mind, that a third element is born—the transcendent function—that is according to Jung, the “unfolding of our original, potential wholeness” (p. 186). Therefore, it could be argued that the distorted and deformed perspectives created by psychosis contain within them a seed of potential through their unflinching illumination of shadow material, “…the dawning recognition of oneself in its most unfamiliar form” (Watts, 1963, p. 41), that, if handled wisely, can produce profound transformation.

My lived experiences of healing and recovery correspond closely with the above theory. After a series of manic episodes, I found myself with two options: attempt to move forward with my life by leaving the experiences to rest and doing my best to forget the whole thing; or counterintuitively, pivot back to face them and learn the language of the archetypes and symbols that had flooded my consciousness. I felt very strongly while I was immersed in mania that I was moving through the dreamscape of my mind, and that every person, object, and event I encountered was an element of my unconscious. It was as if my internal world had been turned inside out and life was just my imagination.

The integration of this period of “endarkenment”, through engaging the transcendent function, has resulted in an increase in positive mind states such as appreciation, compassion, joy, and peace. As well, I have found a more grounded and mature way of being in the world through the recognition of the sacred in the everyday, rather than a seeking of transcendental states. Finally, through using these experiences to help others, a clear channel and pathway has been created for the deep call to service I have felt since I was a child. The ideas contained within my personal experiences—formulated from the philosophical, psychological, and spiritual approaches used in this argument—offer a perspective of psychosis that is imbued with purpose, meaning, and even wisdom, which stands in contrast to the construction of psychological crisis within mental health services and society as a whole.

However, the notion that there is an evolutionary purpose to pain and suffering has been noted by wisdom traditions and perennial philosophies all over the world and throughout time. St John of the Cross articulated this through poetry as “The Dark Night of the Soul” (Underhill, 1955) and in alchemy, it constitutes the essential “nigredo” phase of transformation that
translates as “the blackening” (Hedesan, 2009). In Buddhism, the First Noble Truth states that suffering is an inherent part of life, and in shamanism, crisis and illness are considered initiations into realms otherwise inaccessible. An abundance of research within Transpersonal Psychology continues to reveal this unlikely logic of human potential. Steve Taylor’s recent study (2017) is an important contribution to this discussion. Building on his previous study conducted in 2012, he identified “psychological turmoil” as the most common trigger for what he has classified as “awakening experiences” that, in the context of this argument, could be likened to temporary experiences of enlightenment. The significance of these findings is considerable as it goes against the reason and logic prized so dearly in contemporary Western paradigms; that out of suffering and turmoil can come states such as peace, joy, harmony and appreciation, as well as several other characteristics collated in the study, such as intensified perception, connection/unity and quietening of the mind (Taylor, 2017).

It would therefore appear that the dynamics of enantiodromia in this context work in both directions. An overwhelmingly strong encounter with the Divine can, for those with an unstable self-structure, lead to its apparent opposite—an immersion in various states of chaos, delusion, and suffering. Encouragingly, the reverse can also be true. Surrendering to the reality of these darker experiences with an attitude of humility, curiosity, and openness can lead to expanded states of awareness, including enlightenment experiences. It is worth noting however that the latter of these two movements doesn’t arise automatically. As Jung (1966) knew, it takes action as well as suffering to transmute “the noble with the base components” (p. 360) of one’s psyche that allows for the second movement of enantiodromia to take place, and according to Virginia Curtis in Descending to the Transcendent (2016), “a wisdom not otherwise attained” to emerge (p. 17).

Through this process, the teaching of Zen master Seng Ts’an (in Humphreys, 1971) becomes palpable: Heaven and Earth are indeed in close proximity, as if within each pole there were a doorway leading to the other, as depicted in the interpenetrating circles of light and dark in the Chinese symbol of Yin and Yang. The advice to not have fixed thoughts, either in favor or against, could be partially interpreted as pointing to the optimal attitude of non-judgement towards the unconscious material that emerges when one is engaged in the alchemy of inner change.

How does society respond to individuals found floundering in the mysterious gorge between heaven and earth? To borrow from Clarke’s lexicon (2010), this crossing into the “transliminal” is received differently according to culture (Prince, 1992 cited in Lukoff et al., 2009, p. 62). Communities that invest meaning in these states are more likely to facilitate a healthy resolution of these crises due to the acceptance and shamanic mentoring of individuals exhibiting unusual behaviour and/or beliefs (Borges, 2014). The stark difference in attitude between these communities and Western mental health systems was recorded by director Phil Borges in his acclaimed documentary, CrazyWise (Geier, 2014), that is becoming a popular catalyst for discussion within the mental health activist movement. Despite these progressions the construction of crisis as inherently invalid, meaningless, and of no benefit to the individual or society still dominates front line mental health services, witnessed directly through my professional work as a mental health worker within the NHS. Therefore, the ethical implications of transpersonal research into crisis and transformation are critical, but require integration into the clinical setting. Although being tackled with increased energy and interest, this continues to be a challenging and complex task.

In concluding this argument, let us return to the original question of whether the neologism ‘endarkenment’, forms a valid dichotomy to enlightenment. Enlightenment, and by default, endarkenment, can be interpreted in multiple ways, both intellectually and experientially due to the unique spiritual learning of each individual. For Tart (1995) the former was virtually impossible to articulate with language, and so the construction of its opposite as endarkenment was used as a doorway through which to enter a broad discussion of human transformation. Taking an intentionally more focused approach, this argument
wove philosophical, psychological, and spiritual understandings of polarity into lived experiences of insanity, which were imagined as the epitome of the endarkened state. What emerged was a nuanced exploration of this dichotomy as both valid and invalid, made possible through a circular depiction of interpenetrating opposites and an embrace of paradox.

It is through the direct experience of separation and suffering, that wholeness, wisdom, and wellbeing can be known. There is a seed of potential within all states and conditions, including those deemed most taboo in society such as psychosis. Reflecting on the dynamic of enantiodromia, it could be contended that the more extreme the endarkenment, the more potent the seed of awakening, thanks to the raw exposure of unconscious material. The alchemical work associated with Jung’s transcendent function is shown to be central at this stage, as the tension between conscious and unconscious content is confronted and the “tenth of an inch” between heaven and earth revealed.

Just as reconciliation between conflicting aspects of one’s own mind constitutes an integrated path to enlightenment, where dichotomy is both acknowledged and transcended, a further synthesising of transpersonal research and clinical practice is needed to create the societal structures capable of providing compassionate responses to individuals in crisis. Through recognition that light and dark exist in dynamic play within the landscape of every human heart, I hope we can move beyond the dualistic paradigms present in professional teams as well as activist or anti-psychiatry groups. Beneath and beyond these polarized positions there is a deep compassion for the human condition, in all its states, waiting to be experienced and listened to.
Martha Sneyd

Martha Sneyd is an MSc student of the Alef Trust and has been working in mental health since her experiences with Ayahuasca. As part of this work she has led groups in compassion focused therapy (CFT) for people experiencing psychotic symptoms and/or low self esteem as well as psycho-educational art groups for people with a history of complex trauma. She is co-director of an interdisciplinary think tank for research in Bristol that aims to improve the lives of people who have experienced psychosis and those close to them through cutting edge research and public engagement events. This combination of research, lived experience, professional work and academic study has led to invitations for regular public speaking engagements within the NHS where she aims to bridge aspects of transpersonal psychology with clinical practice. She is also a student of Zen Buddhism and is looking forward to a three month immersion in her teacher’s monastery in the fall of this year.
Could Psychological Crisis be a Symptom or Catalyst for Awakening Experience?

Donna Thomas

During this essay, I will discuss the potential of transformation through crisis. Reflecting on my own experience, I will examine the relationship between psychological turmoil and sudden awakening, exploring whether crisis is a symptom or catalyst for self-realization—or both.

According to Taylor & Egeto-Szabo (2017), the term awakening refers to an expansion or opening of awareness where our perceptions, ways of being, and vision of the world is transformed; bringing a new sense of harmony, meaning, and connection.

My awakening occurred in 2015. I believe many factors contributed towards this process, including trauma, value dissonance, and a difficult bereavement; all of which culminated in burnout. Despite the difficulties, this crisis transformed my life in a positive and meaningful way.
Through the darkness, a fog lifted and for the first time I had clarity about who I was. My worldview rapidly changed, however, the essence of this experience is very difficult to explain.

I questioned what had driven me towards awakening: Was I innately spiritual, yet unaware? Certainly, religion bore no influence and yet despite this, I found God—figuratively speaking.

Reflecting on this experience I now realise that I had failed to listen to the subtler aspects of who I really was. Repressed by external expectations, this inner knowing finally erupted during a major event. Despite this new appreciation, I still have many questions and continue to suffer the same challenges as before. At my core, however, I am more stable, content, and I have developed a strong sense of purpose. I see the world with new eyes and cannot return to old ways of being.

Studies suggest the most significant trigger for awakening is psychological turmoil (Egeto-Szabo, 2017; Taylor, 2012b). According to Steve Taylor PhD (2017), those that encounter such an awakening often experience positive aftereffects. Many report feeling more resilient, appreciative, and confident. Taylor calls this phenomenon “posttraumatic transformation” (p. 105). He also indicates that shifts in perspective are not always sudden with some undergoing more gradual realisations; yet once the shift occurs, they feel born again.

So why does psychological turmoil commonly cause this phenomenon? In a book entitled, In the Grip: Understanding Type, Stress, and the Inferior Function, psychologist, Naomi Quenk explains that when we experience extreme stress or fatigue, our conscious energy becomes depleted giving way to unconscious processing. This experience is known as being in the grip, and can present as “out-of-character thoughts, feelings and behaviours” (Quenk, 2000, p. 1). This book was produced as part of a series explaining the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), which was based on theories developed by one of the pioneers of psychology, Carl Jung (1875-1961). The following is a personal example that demonstrates how a grip experience can manifest:

According to MBTI, I possess the rarest (and most spiritual) personality type, known as INFJ. My dominant functions, are Introverted Intuition and Extroverted Feeling. This means that I am inwardly focused, future-orientated, empathic and use complex patterns to navigate the world. In simplistic terms, I am shy, focused, creative and although I am people-orientated, I prefer being alone to explore my inner thoughts.

Prior to my burnout experience, I was subjected to work-related stress and prolonged periods working outside of these natural functions. As a result, my conscious energy became tired, and my unconscious, inferior function (Extroverted Sensing) came to the fore. The appearance of this function prompted an immediate need for sensory stimuli. In this case, I pursued high speed activities such as roller coaster rides and risky behaviour such as driving fast. This is consistent with the out-of-character features described above and associated with being in the grip.

“Almost 78% of awakening experiences occurred spontaneously and outside the context of spiritual practice. Without any conceptual framework for such experiences, individuals may not understand what is happening, which limits integration and subsequent transformation.”
Could these out-of-character episodes account for the unusual feelings experienced during sudden awakenings? There are similarities; for example, grip experiences are relatively rare, and as stated, occur when individuals are extremely stressed. Taylor (2017) describes posttraumatic transformation as “rare” (p. 123) and commonly triggered by trauma, including intense stress.

During research, Taylor found that almost 78% of awakening experiences occurred spontaneously and outside the context of spiritual practice (Taylor, 2012b). Without any conceptual framework for such experiences, individuals may not understand what is happening, limiting integration and subsequent transformation. An example may include an individual experiencing transcendental awareness during a time of extreme stress; however, dismissing this experience as imagination or mental disturbance. This indicates that awakening experiences (that do not lead to transformation) are actually more common than reported. Professor of Philosophy, Michael Washburn (1988) supports this argument, stating that while many people experience awakening, “few undergo spiritual transformation” (p. 7).

In addition, those that experience awakening share similar characteristics, such as a feeling of oneness or non-duality, as well as “an intense sense of well-being and gratitude [and]…a wider sense of perspective” (Taylor, 2017, p. 106). These arguments, however, don’t necessarily correspond with theories presented by Quenk (2000), since according to MBTI, there are 16 different personality types, all of which will have a unique grip experience. As such, the characteristics that each individual will present when acting out-of-character would differ and in some cases, be at polar ends to each other. This raises the question as to whether the unconscious (and its potential connection to the spiritual realm - discussed later) is wholly revealed during a grip episode. Certainly, in my case, the grip experience led me away from behaviour associated with spiritual reflection or connection.

Some theories suggest that the ego still plays a significant role in a grip experience. Nucleur physicist, Amit Goswami PhD, indicates that the ego is not only influenced by conditioning, but also the constructs we create to form our personalities. These constructs are “a function of our own uniqueness and importance” (Goswami, 2017, p. 97). This does appear to correspond with the individual nature of grip experiences as described above. Faith, like any other condition, may also hinder spiritual awareness (Baring, 2013).

Goswami (2017) further explains that only when we are able to transcend the ego (and these conditions), we may experience ourselves as “unitive” (p. 95). This corresponds with the awakening experiences described in Taylor’s research; evincing their transpersonal quality. Psychiatrist, Stanislav Grof, one of the most influential figures in transpersonal psychology, explains that the transpersonal domain relates to the way we identify with other people and with aspects of nature. He describes this realm as “a source of ancestral...phylogenetic, and karmic memories, as well as visions of archetypal beings and mythological regions” (Grof, 2000, p. 20). This implies that awakening experiences may extend beyond a grip encounter.

Outside of experiences attributed to being in the grip, Quenk (2000) indicates that material from our unconscious emerges to a greater degree during mid-life. Coincidently, research studies relating to awakening experiences appear to focus on individuals in their later years. Many believe there to be a connection between the unconscious and the transpersonal realm (as described by Grof, above). Could the increased reporting of awakening experience in older individuals be indicative of the connection between the unconscious and spiritual domain?

The founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, referred to the unconscious as the Id. He disagreed with this connection, discounting the transpersonal level all together. He believed the unconscious realm was made up of our instincts, desires and other qualities, and to be wholly pre-egoic in nature (Sanders, 2013; Washburn, 1988). Grof (2000) concurred, proclaiming that the unconscious is limited
exclusively to the domain of the psyche and distinct from the transpersonal realm. It “consists mostly of postnatal biographical material...forgotten or actively repressed” (p. 21). Jung disagreed believing that unconscious content contains our “collective nonlocal memory” (Goswami, 2012, p. 89). He recognised two fields of unconscious processing. He likened the first field, the personal unconscious, to Freud’s Id, because it contains our “feelings and tendencies which may have been repressed due to parental and cultural conditioning” (Baring, 2013, p. 249). He called the second field, the collective unconscious, a greater transpersonal field containing universal archetypal experience.

This second field appears to correspond with descriptions provided of awakening experience by Taylor (2017). Taylor stipulates, however, that awakening experiences in children are “probably more common than in adulthood” (p. 221) contradicting the mid-life theory; however, this does not discount a connection between the unconscious and the spiritual realm. It may also indicate that grip experiences may be limited to the personal unconscious as opposed to the collective unconscious, as described by Jung.

Mid-life can present its own challenges. According to psychiatrist, Dr. Tim Read (2014), at this age we are more likely to experience a crisis of meaning. Despite achieving life’s goals, we may feel a lingering sense of dissatisfaction or dis-ease, evoking crisis which is “associated with a threat to the ego” (p. 174). Read believes that during this crisis we are likely to experience low mood and may encounter various forms of numinous experience. Numinous experience is described as having a strong religious or spiritual quality, comparable with the awakening experiences that Taylor’s research revealed. For this to occur, however, the ego must “fail significantly to stop the repression of Self” (Read, 2014, p. 185).

Read’s (2014) explanation coincides with a theory developed by transpersonal writer and philosopher, Ken Wilber. Wilber’s (Wilber & McCormick, 1990) Hierarchal Psyche Structure estimates that around mid-life we enter the transegoic psychic level.

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theory suggests that we are open to experiencing archetypes and unitive consciousness before moving on to a stage of psychic integration. In contrast, Washburn (1988) believes there to be a more dynamic interplay between the ego and what he calls the Dynamic Ground. The Ground consists of the creative and spontaneous source out of which the ego emerges in young childhood, then becomes estranged. His theory presents a spiralling loop where at mid-life, the ego bends back towards the Ground on the way to integration with the transpersonal. He postulates that the psychic and spiritual derive from a single source.

Washburn (1988) also indicates that “transvaluation of values can lead to spiritual awakening” (P. 7); meaning that the re-evaluation of our core values against the conditions of our lives (which may occur during mid-life), may lead, in itself, to a spiritual awakening. Relating this to my own experience, I believe, value dissonance (or living a life incompatible with my values) was a major contributor to my burnout and subsequent awakening. There also appears similarities between this theory and that of a mid-life grip experience. Perhaps crisis is a symptom of awakening when these changes or realisations become chaotic or overbearing, or perhaps it is the catalyst, accelerating integration and self-actualisation.

In his theory of hierarchy of needs, psychologist, Abraham Maslow (1908-1970), estimated that only 2% of individuals will reach a state of self-actualisation. Self-actualisation, a term introduced by Maslow, refers to a movement towards one’s full potential. He later extended his theory to include self-transcendence (Maslow, 1970a; 1970b). Maslow, describes this stage as “the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos” (Maslow, 1971, p. 269.) As postulated, if only 2% of individuals reach a stage of self-actualisation, does this suggest that this higher stage of self-transcendence would be less prevalent? Maslow does not indicate that the stage of self-actualisation is a pre-requisite to transcendence; describing instead peak experiences that possess the same mystical and unitive qualities of the sudden awakening, again described in Taylor’s research. Posttraumatic transformation, on the other hand, could indicate a more permanent transcendental state. This experience appears to correlate with Washburn and Wilber’s transegoic stage and may be, as indicated earlier, much rarer.

Grof also makes a distinction between gradual and sudden awakenings, referring to spiritual emergence as the gradual unfolding of awareness with little disruption, and spiritual emergency as a sudden awakening that causes major disruption (Taylor, 2017). These theories may explain why individuals who have experienced sudden awakening—or even to some extent, posttraumatic transformation—may continue to find life challenging. Continued self-development and spiritual practice may be needed to achieve a more permanent transcendental state.

Like Washburn, psychologist, Roberto Assagioli (1973), believed that self-realisation is the lifelong interplay between the ego and Self, suggesting that both the psyche and transpersonal realm are relevant for spiritual development. John Firman, a student of Assagioli, who helped develop the theory of psychosynthesis, stated that “exploration of the unconscious was important for developing a relationship with the Self”. However, he stipulated that the “Self…[shouldn’t]…be confused with the Superconscious” (Firman, 1996, p. 6). The superconscious, according to Atkinson (2010), is a plane “above-consciousness” (p. 163). This is described as the ultimate reality, something behind and beyond the transcendental state and human awareness. Firman suggests Self to be omnipresent but distinct from numinous content. “Self pervades all…areas of the person—lower…middle…and higher unconscious.” Therefore, he states, “we may encounter Self within any type of human experience, from healing...early wounding, to embracing...peak experience, to managing our daily affairs” (Firman, 1996, p. 15-16).

Modern day pressures may leave little space to notice these subtler aspects of who we are. “Pre-occupation...
could divert attention away from our inner selves, causing us to lose connection to important values and meaning” (Thomas, 2018, p. 121). As Goswami (2017) explains, “the ego is determined and predictable” (p. 97). In essence, this makes it more available and reliable; potentially preventing deep listening or reflection.

According to Taylor (2017), during turmoil our normal psychological functions break down. This may result in “lower levels of Ego-strength” (Stearns & Moore, 1993, p. 129). Is it reasonable, therefore, to assume that during crisis, the ego’s influence is disabled, causing natural patterns of thinking to be interrupted? During these situations, could something else enter this space? According to Goswami (2017), a person’s mind and the supramental (or the world of archetypes), cannot interact as “they give different kinds of subtle experiences—thinking and intuition respectively” (p. 39).

Certainly, whilst we’re preoccupied with concern, we tend to overthink. As Goswami (2017) suggests, this may cause intuition, the channel to the supramental, to shut down. Once normal functions disintegrate, intuition may become more noticeable. Both Jung and Assagioli believed intuition is the simplest way for transpersonal content to reach us as it permits perceptions to arise from the unconscious (Assagioli, 1967; 1991). Goswami (2012) describes the unconscious as the realm of potentialities (a quantum wave of possibilities), adding that this “unmanifested consciousness...belongs to the supramental domain” (p. 89). Could the collapse of this content into our awareness explain the awakening phenomena?

Burnout, for me, presented both physical and psychological symptoms. According to Goswami (2017), illnesses such as chronic fatigue “occur even when all...physical organs are functioning properly...dis-ease can come from our vital, mental, and intuitive bodies” (p. 105). As described, my dis-ease resulted from years of dissonance between my inner values and outer world. This was more pronounced and problematic within the context of work. Hochschild (1983) recognized the potential for burnout when dissonance occurs between corporate expectation and workers’ emotions or values. Blackstone (1992) believed that “the longer psychological pain is...hidden from awareness, the more it will affect the body” (p. 115). My disparity invoked a life-long search for meaning (which in itself was tiring); however, the more I became aware of it, the harder it was to ignore. In the end, I broke under the weight of increased work stress and the unexpected loss of a loved one.

Reverend Professor, Stephen Wright (2005), described burnout as “a form of deep human suffering at every level—physical, psychological, social, spiritual— which occurs when old ways of being...no longer work and start to disintegrate” (p. 2). He considers burnout a spiritual crisis—one of meaning, purpose and connection—recognising the need for the soul to be true to itself. Vaughan (1995) concurs, postulating that burnout indicates a state of spiritual aridity. He believed that treatment calls for spiritual renewal or awakening. In this sense, crisis may be a natural healing response. “The fundamental mistake was supposing that the healing process was the disease” (Read, 2014, p. 103). Assagioli (1961) agreed stating that crisis may lead to an opening between the Self and the ego. This often results in a release; healing the conflict and suffering experienced by the individual. This may confirm to the person that symptoms “weren’t due to any physical cause but...the direct outcome of...inner strife; spiritual awakening amounts to a real cure” (p. 6).

Conversely, research by Chopko et al. (2016) revealed a positive association between spiritual growth and distress. Could this explain why crisis could also amount to a symptom of awakening? As Ellis Linders, a tutor at Alef Trust wrote, “Unlike most literature on this topic...I understand CFS (Chronic Fatigue Syndrome)...as a symptom of...[awakening]...as, among other functions...fatigue is a protective mechanism to slow down the amount of transpersonal content entering the body” (Linders, 2018, n.p). Similarly, another tutor, Jevon Dangeli (2013), describes transpersonal burnout as soul sickness, and believes that this state narrows our awareness. “I-consciousness is...often...masked by psychological symptoms, and lost in the rush of modern living” (Firman, 1996, p. 14).
As previously argued, however, the breakdown of functions may allow the inflow of superconscious energies “and their integration with pre-existing aspects of the personality” (Assagioli, 1965, p. 55). Perhaps in this space we develop a more authentic awareness, leading to new perspectives and subsequent healing. In her book, The Subtle Self, psychotherapist Judith Blackstone describes her own recovery:

[It] seemed...miraculous because it occurred spontaneously...by simply relaxing...I [felt]...an inherent movement...toward balance and health. It was a movement of both...mind and body, a gradual merging of the two. [This]... was accompanied by a sense of coming alive, of moving toward truth. I felt deep contact with myself, as if my mind were awakening in every cell. At the same time, I felt communion with all of life, as if this subtle level of the mind were also the mind of the world, or...universe. (Blackstone, 1992, p. ix)

Like others, Blackstone (1992) experienced positive change. She believed that growth is motivated by our pre-existing potential of wholeness. Reflecting on my experience, I now understand that a significant factor in recovery was the realisation of my life purpose or as Linders (2018) put it – “purpose with a big ‘P’”:

“Sooner or later something...call[s] us onto a particular path. This is what I must do...This is who I am,” wrote archetypal psychologist James Hillman (2017, p. 1). Blackstone (1992) believes that “to have a lucid relationship with the universe, we must know what we want. Before that, the universe...respond[s] to our...conflicted, fragmented needs;...life appears arbitrary and cruel” (p. 77).

Having reflected on the literature, I was able to disprove a theory that I have held for some time regarding an exclusive relationship between being in the grip (a state when conscious energy becomes depleted giving way to unconscious processing)
and having an awakening experience. Evidence suggests that they’re distinct, although perhaps not completely unconnected. Open to further exploration is the connection between crisis, awakening, and unconscious processing.

I also believe that spiritual crisis could be both a symptom and a catalyst for awakening—a symptom in that it may reveal itself as a natural response to rapid spiritual growth and subsequent disparity with external conditions, as indicated by Wright (2005), Vaughan (1995) and Chopko et al (2016). It could be a catalyst, in that it may be seen as a resulting breakdown of psychological functions allowing for the influx of unconscious material, as postulated by Taylor (2017), Grof (2000), Read (2014), Goswami (2017), Assagioli (1991), and Jung. Whether this influx contains spiritual content depends on which interpretation is accepted.

Awakening experiences may allow us to establish what we want or need. The development of new meaning can change our world view, allowing us to reach what Taylor (2017) calls a higher functioning state. For me, life just seems more authentic. I am secure as if I have “returned home to a place where I feel...comfortable...and natural” (Taylor, 2017, p. 220). As stated, my experience proved positive; yet, instinctively, I know there is more to discover. For now, however, I feel no urgency; I am content with whatever arises and after a tempestuous life, it’s a pleasant place to be.

**References**


COULD PSYCHOLOGICAL CRISIS BE A SYMPTOM OR CATALYST FOR AWAKENING EXPERIENCE?


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**Donna Louise Thomas** is a serving Police Sergeant based in West Wales. She has enjoyed a varied and successful career as a Detective Constable and within supervisory roles. In 2011 she received a Chief Constable’s Commendation for her role in a high-profile cold case review that resulted in the conviction of the ‘Bullseye Killer’. She is currently qualified to the rank of Inspector and specialises in training and detention. Prior to policing she served with the Fire Service, Territorial Army and gained a BSc. in Surveying for Resource Development. Using her coaching skills and qualifications gained in Transpersonal Psychology, Neuro-linguistic Programming and MBTI, Donna is developing a new coaching program to assist colleagues suffering with stress and burnout.
COULD PSYCHOLOGICAL CRISIS BE A SYMPTOM OR CATALYST FOR AWAKENING EXPERIENCE?
As described by transpersonal psychologist Jacqueline Linder (2014) in her groundbreaking intuitive inquiry into the psycho-spiritual impact of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) on adult women, CSA can affect a woman’s body, heart, mind, and soul for many years after she experiences the initial trauma. Survivors of this type of primal wounding frequently experience decades of chronic shame, self-loathing, contamination of their identity, and may develop patterns of dissociating from their bodies in order to escape their worst moments of psychological and somatic pain.

As with any trauma, unbearable memories may transmute into sensory experiences, overwhelming emotions, unhealthy behavioural re-enactments, and a pronounced incapacity to initiate, navigate and sustain intimate relationships (Emerson & Hopper, 2011). Linder’s (2014) contribution was to find that at the core of some survivor’s feelings was a sense that their soul had been wounded, shattered, stolen, or lost. In such cases, survival, recovery, and healing require the decision to live to be made over again in complex, adverse and repetitive circumstances.

My repeated decision to live, and determination to recover from the effects of CSA, has facilitated not just my physical healing, but a gradual and sometimes bumpy process of psychological growth and spiritual transformation—a kind of body, heart and...
soul recovery, if you will. Cortright (2007) describes healing as “a reparative process of working through old wounds and emotional hurts and trauma” (p. 73), and growth as “the emergence of...new potentials, new feelings, new experiences, new parts of the self coming forth toward actualization” (p. 73). He suggests transformation occurs “when there is enough healing and growth to bring about the emergence of a new organizing principle that alters our entire being” (p. 73).

In my case, a combination of reparative surgery, depth psychotherapy, meditation, yoga, and dance have helped me evolve from a state of fragmentation (a child fleeing her body, family and society), into a state of increasing integration (an adult traveling a path home towards her inner essence, psychic centre, or “spirit”). On this path, I have experienced that body, mind, and soul are ultimately inseparable, and that physical healing, emotional restoration, psychological growth, and spiritual transformation call for embracing and reintegrating each of these domains of our embodied existence.

The thread of my life that started with CSA wove and warped through a series of medical and psychoanalytic interventions in my 20s and 30s, until I discovered spiritual practice and creative embodied expression in mid-life and finally achieved some semblance of restoration to a full sense of self. Along this path, something extraordinary happened when I began to move more consciously away from outer goals and towards connection with my inner spirit. This allowed me to emerge as my own witness, able to observe my sensations, emotions, and behaviour from a place grounded within my body rather than dissociated from it.

In that place, I became more able to accept and withstand what Jungian psychotherapist Hillevi Ruumet (2006) describes as “inevitable returns” to the physical, emotional, and relational sites of the initial wounding. This, in turn meant that I could hold uncertainty about how the future might unfold and no longer felt compelled to invest most of my energy into struggling towards an elusive ideal of healing.

In a way, I surrendered to what was, and that's when things started to change.

I find it helpful to use Ruumet’s (2006) model of psycho-spiritual development to provide structure and meaning to my story, because she doesn’t prescribe any single path for healing and wholeness, or any particular outcome. She also doesn’t pathologise wounding. Rather, she suggests that there are boundless and simultaneous possibilities for all humans to develop egoically (finding individual accomplishment), trans-egoically (developing unconditional love and compassion, authentic self-expression and finding their sacred vocation) and transpersonally (discovering and embodying the harmony of the body, mind and soul) during a lifetime, and that each type of growth is as valuable as the other.

“Genuine, sustainable transformation involves a lifetime of peeking beneath our bandages to see what more needs healing, and to go about that healing with the utmost self-compassion.”

In essence, Ruumet’s (2006) model permits as many experiences of transformation as there are individuals, and therefore, my story and all stories fit this model. It also feels appropriate, because she encourages lifelong engagement with one’s primal wounds, and the attenuation of our egoic responses to them, to improve one’s psychological health and spiritual wellbeing. In other words, for Ruumet, genuine, sustainable transformation involves a lifetime of
peeking beneath our bandages to see what more needs healing, and to go about that healing with the utmost self-compassion. This resonates with me as, time and again, life compels me to lift my bandages, and I realize that what I thought was resolved still needs my care and attention and may always do so.

Emerson and Hopper (2011) state that making peace with the body is key to healing from trauma (p. 6). As a survivor of CSA, I faced a cluster of physical and psychological symptoms that threatened my quality of life, self-esteem, self-image, and even, at times, my physical existence. My healing and growth had, for decades, been intimately connected to fighting or curing those symptoms, but has ultimately been achieved by diving ever more deeply into my body to connect with my spirit.

Looking back, each step of the way was inevitable and necessary. The first steps required a surgeon’s skill to repair surface tissue; the next ones, the support of a therapist to find my voice. Beyond that, yoga and dance helped me connect with my soul, and even more deeply, meditation helped me reveal my spirit. Having experienced the need for many levels of experimentation on my journey, I passionately support Linder’s (2014) call for practitioners who work with survivors of CSA to ensure that a full range of medical, psychotherapeutic, spiritual, and expressive (body, mind and soul) therapies are available to them.

References


Lorraine Clewer

Lorraine Clewer has worked for twenty years as a human, labour and women’s rights advocate in Latin America and the Arab World. As part of her healing journey she began practicing Yoga, and later qualified as a teacher specialized in Yoga Psychology. Her desire to weave together self-healing, community healing and social justice led her to the Alef Trust’s MSc. in Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychotherapy, where she is researching the transformative potential of teaching yoga in jails. She holds undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Geography and International Development, and is also training to become a Dance Psychotherapist.
A Critical Evaluation of MacGilchrist’s Look at Western Society’s Machiavellian Mindset Compared to the Context Blindness Displayed by Autistic Individuals

Tania Botoulas
This essay will provide a two-part engagement with the recorded content of a lecture presented by Dr. Iain McGilchrist (2011). McGilchrist is an accomplished interdisciplinary scholar and a well-read and highly articulate speaker, who embellished his talk with interesting facts. To properly critique and engage with his material, a summary of his lecture will be provided. Specific attention will be given to both his neurological and sociological analysis of brain hemispheres. Following this will be a critique of his work that focuses on definition of terms, generalisation of conclusions, and exclusion of the heart and gut brain.

Insights and applications of McGilchrist's arguments will then be applied to the understanding of autism spectrum disorder in order to further highlight the difficulties that arise from left hemisphere thinking and introduce the idea that environmental factors may be contributing to the decrease in man’s ability to successfully integrate hemispheric constructs. This section is particularly useful in demonstrating McGilchrist's argument, and has further implications in the importance of applying scientific discoveries into a more holistic contextual environment.

McGilchrist (2011) goes on to describe that the right frontal lobe, which is larger and slightly asymmetrical compared to the left, is involved in “seeing the bigger picture.” The function of the corpus callosum is to both separate and then integrate the two points of view, whereas the function of the frontal cortex is to inhibit reactions or impulses or more specifically create a “necessary distance” which allows for an informed decision, a choice in response. It obtains a sense of the contextual whole before the left hemisphere proceeds with analysing the individual parts prior to passing information back via the corpus callosum to be re-integrated in the whole.

In explanation of this process, McGilchrist (2011) suggests an evolutionary theory in which the two hemispheres were kept apart to allow for different types of attention to develop. The left hemisphere, with its highly defined focussing ability, complements the right hemisphere’s broad uncommitted attention, thereby allowing us to focus on what we find interesting while remaining alert to other sensory information. Attention, he states, creates our world through focused perception which creates a model of understanding for the surrounding environment. However, he also suggests that the ability to integrate the two is tied to brain development over time, beginning with an innate ability for empathy, compassion, co-operation, and truth, whilst only later developing skills that allow us to lie, manipulate, and deceive.

McGilchrist (2011) then moves on to liken current cultural and societal behaviours to the analytical detail-oriented left hemisphere. He postulates the debatable issue that since the 18th Century, mankind seems to be losing the ability to empathically engage with the world, despite the fact that the latter half of the 18th Century is linked to the emergence of empathetic trends such as the woman’s and anti-slavery movements. This, he argues, is due to a stronger inclination toward left brain perception, causing civilisation to drift towards over specialisation,
Depersonalization, and materialism—an approach that results in increasing bureaucracy, greed, isolation, and even paranoia.

To explain these social shifts, McGilchrist (2011) turns to use neurological information for heuristic purposes. An empathetic response is a more right-brained Erasmian response, which attends to both the individual and the contextual importance. An “end justifies the means” response is a more left-brained Machiavellian style of thinking which produces a unilateral decision that reflects the power of the individual constituents. McGilchrist criticises the modern world and associated culture for its emphasis on left hemisphere-style knowledge. This manifests on platforms such as media, art, and technology to the detrimental exclusion of more right hemisphere-style thinking. McGilchrist closes his lecture by reminding his audience that while the left hemisphere knows a lot, the right hemisphere knows more, and that as humans and scientists, we need both visions of the world to understand our interconnectedness and become rational sentient beings.

McGilchrist (2011) puts forward a useful analogy of the lateral and unified constituents of the brain through looking at the differences in the structure and the function of the individual hemispheres which neurologically and sociologically enables an understanding of neurotypical and atypical behaviours. However, his lecture is not entirely immune to points of criticism or critique, such as his definition and use of the term “empathy,” and his generalisation of left hemisphere thinking across cultures. McGilchrist used the term “empathy” loosely to cover the ability to resonate with others, impute their beliefs, and predict their behaviours.

Whilst applicable, this definition fails to reflect the complexity and subtleties of empathy. For example, Simon Baron-Cohen (2001) describes empathy as “being able to infer the full range of mental states (beliefs, desires, intentions, imagination, emotions, etc. in one’s own and in other’s minds) that cause action” (p. 41). In contrast, Batson’s (2010) Altruism Empathy Hypothesis uses the term “empathetic concern” to describe the perceived welfare of someone in need,
or “empathetic emotion,” and further distinguishes it from seven other uses of the term “empathy.”

To be clear in our thinking and application or further investigation and research of his work, it is imperative that such terminology be clarified. Following this, in his introduction of the metaphoric allegory of Machiavellian and Erasmian thinking to the hemispheres, McGilchrist (2011) suggests that modern society and culture is reflecting left-brained thinking in their actions. In doing so, he makes a broad assumption that all cultural groups across the world are behaving in a similar fashion. Whilst this is possibly a dominant trait, particularly through the paradigms of globalisation and technological access, it is problematic to perpetuate an understanding that does not reflect any cross-cultural variation. There is a high probability that there are groups that still display contextually integrated world views, reflecting the dual nature of hemispheric processing rather than the more isolated detailed knowledge that McGilchrist associates with modern culture.

For example, recent MRI studies highlight differences in the way that Chinese and American brains process stimuli differently and indicate that culture can shape and alter the perception of the brain (Park & Chee, 2010). By commenting as an observer and making sociological generalisations, McGilchrist’s work could be considered either limited by a Western-centric bias or problematic if being applied beyond the scope of the modern Western environment. McGilchrist’s theories could also be challenged by new research into a more tiered understanding of knowledge that reaches beyond the neurology of the brain or more complex analysis of brain functioning.

Work by G. Soosalu and M. Oka (2013), whose book mBraining refers to neurological findings implying that by tapping into one of our three brains—the head, heart, or gut brain—reveals how we can access innate intuitive and complex wisdoms which have been linked to ancient esoteric and spiritual traditions. Unlike McGilchrist’s choice of Machiavellian versus Erasmian metacognitive choices, they highlight a whole-body awareness, stating that we utilise three neural organs to tap into ability to perform and choose actions, which are based on Courage (enteric brain), Compassion (heart brain), and Creativity (cephalic brain).

Applying the anatomical and functional differences of the brain to mirror broadly current societies’ engagement and cultural standpoints can act as a useful metaphor, if only to help further our understanding that becoming highly specialised in any science contributes directly to the inability and resistance to integrating detailed knowledge into a wider humane and cohesive humanistic approach. It should not be limited and needs to be open to further right hemispheric analyses and application.

The close parallels of McGilchrist’s (2011) part versus whole thinking, such that the emphasis is placed on a specific part rather than its contextual relevance, results in alienation rather than engagement and a specific highly detailed perception rather than an integrated whole understanding. This is strikingly embodied in individuals who have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). A look at autism
can highlight the effects of a strict left hemisphere thinking and immature or disordered right pre-frontal lobe involvement. Recent research has highlighted the importance that the lack of social empathy displayed in individuals with Autism does not indicate a complete absence of empathy; instead it reflects an impairment in the cortical midline structures that affects both the inter- and intra-personal cognitive processes linked to the expression and maturation of empathy (Lombardo, Barnes, Wheelwright, Baron-Cohen, 2007). The similarities are observable both in the neurology and behaviours displayed by individuals with ASD, and can serve to highlight the short comings of left brain reliance and further support McGilchrist's concern with the Western world's left-orientated thinking as reflected by our consumer-oriented, greed driven society.

Generally, ASD is described as a developmental disorder characterised by difficulties with communication and social interaction manifested by restricted and stereotyped patterns of behaviour, interests, and activities (DSM-5). However, more recently it has also been defined as a complex genetic disorder (Krajmalik, Lozupone, Kang & Adams, 2015), presenting with behavioural abnormalities as well as gut imbalances (de Angelis, Francavilla, Piccolo, de Giancomo & Gobbetti, 2015), and immune system abnormalities (Samsun, Ahangar & Nasar, 2014). Interestingly, ASD thinking and behaviour reflect many of the left hemisphere functions, including a lack of frontal lobe inhibitions and socially bound constructs that McGilchrist's identifies in his lecture. These features frequently result in limited world views that inhibit or affect both the acquisition and application of knowledge and the ability to integrate and apply constructs in pragmatic settings.
Baron-Cohen (2008) comments that key neural regions for ASD diagnosis may well be found in the amygdala, and in the medial and orbito-frontal cortex—the neurological networks which McGilchrist identifies as key components in the development of awareness and perception. Clinically, affected children and adults present with difficulties relating to pragmatic language and other social skills, most often compounding their difficulties with contextual learning. In addition, they often display detail thinking, focussing on parts or details in pictures, stories, or events, and at times displaying savant skills, which are linked to dysfunctional attention skills (Vermeulen, 2011).

While McGilchrist describes how neuro-typicals see global before detail, this is absolutely the reverse in autism, which frequently aids autistic individuals in visual, verbal, absolute or binary type thinking skills (Grandin, 2012). This disorder has been linked to right hemisphere Theory of Mind (ToM) difficulties, otherwise known as “mind blindness” (Vermeulen, 2011). Interestingly, many studies show that as a result of their difficulties, people diagnosed with ASD find it exceptionally difficult to manipulate, deceive, or lie (Li, Kelley, & Evans, 2010)—a feature that may well benefit current western/first world society, especially our political leaders!

Unfortunately, though, this issue has also been linked to feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety, and both ASD sufferers as well as those living with them, complain of resultant social and emotional discords (Li, Kelley, & Evans, 2010). The autist’s inability to consider the points of view, wants, needs, and desires of others frequently leads to angry frustrated emotional meltdowns until their desires are met—a behaviour that can be compared to Machiavellian thinking. While we know that higher functioning ASDs are able to present with some degrees of compassion (once made aware of them explicitly), it is not a skill that can be generalised or applied readily into a variety of contexts, and has been coined ‘Centex blindness’ by Vermeulen, (2011). This area of research thus
supports McGilchrist’s concerns of cultures becoming alienated, abstract, and categorical regarding a left-biased decontextualized view of the world. In addition, it highlights the importance of hemispheric integration on an individual and social level.

While science and analytical thinking can be beneficial contributors and advance our understanding of the world, we should not forget to re-integrate detail and findings thereof ontologically into a global perspective. Vermeulen (2011) points out that pure, controllable, and replicable research may be beneficial, but it fails to be applicable in real life, where variables change dynamically based on context. With autism being on the rise—as many as 1:68 children according to one research paper (Christensen, Bai, Braun, 2012) and some scholars estimating a rise to 1:22 by the year 2020 (Bateman, 2013)—the implications of loss of, or impaired empathy and/or the ability to express empathy in society are highlighted.

While arguments regarding the increasing prevalence of autism abound—many of them quoting broader diagnostic criteria—there is no denying a steep increase. Some researchers are venturing to claim that the increase in ASD may well be because of the rise in toxins in our environment—a belief very close to my own. The question of causality is highlighted here. While McGilchrist (2011) likens cultural behaviours to left hemisphere functions, autism has been linked to neurological differences in the brain and gut.

Recent research is questioning the link to environmental factors. Jepson (2006) comments that in the past 20 years, 80,000 chemicals—none of which have been tested for neurotoxicity—have been introduced into the global environment. These toxins include, medicines, biopesticides, and growth stimulants (Sharma, Kumari, & Menghani, 2014), which cause microbial changed metabolites to affect gut-brain interactions (Krajmalnik-Brown, Lozupone, Kang, & Adams, 2015). The time frame coincides with the steep rise in incidences of ASD globally. If this is indeed so, the implications for future research are enormous as this would undeniably confirm that we as humans are becoming too analytical and isolated as McGilchrist (2011) suggests, but that this has less to do with choice and more to do with a global epidemic caused by humanity’s “progress” in the sciences that are responsible with the production of variable chemical structures that are causing bio-chemical changes in populations exposed to these “advances in technology.”

Genetic pre-disposition and advances in epigenetics may just link ASD’s neurological characteristics to environmental factors brought about by highly-specialised scientific applications without realising the complex interaction between it and other materialistic features. We know from epi-genetics now that environmental factors interact with biological markers to create novel behaviours and disease expression (Feinberg, 2007). If this is indeed so, then maybe the observation of our so-called neuro-typical culture is, in fact, also a response to environmental influences, just on a smaller more resilient scale.

In conclusion, McGilchrist (2011) puts forward a useful and seemingly prevalent analysis of both the neurological aspects of brain hemispheres as well as the sociological manifestations of a more left brain-inclined society. His work illustrates structural techniques that provide novel and previously unapproachable insights into the role of interhemispheric co-ordination in cognition. Furthermore, his sociological analysis of modern thought seems to hold both anecdotal accuracy and application to disorders such as the Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Extreme left hemisphere thinking as evidenced by Autism Spectrum Disorder indicates that even in high functioning autists difficulties in contextualising information may result in individuals having highly specialised skills that they can apply in their own field but who are unable to function without help in a social environment (McGilchrist, 2011). Whilst possibly too generalised or culture specific, his work is useful in highlighting the dangers of a society that uses only left brain thinking as reflected in those diagnosed with Autism. McGilchrist’s observations outline how
a break down in contextualised thinking may lead to an increase in miscommunication and loss of implied meaning leading to radical shifts in the structure of society and the social interactions shared on a day to day basis. Ultimately, left hemispheric thinking can compound the already evident Machiavellian place where profit is attained regardless to the cost of the environment, where science concerned with the microcosm has forgotten/forsaken the macrocosm and its interdependence on contextually bound stimuli.

References


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**Tania Botoulas**

*Tania Botoulas* is a practicing Speech Therapist and Audiologist, specialising in Early Intervention in the paediatric population where she focuses her interest in children with Autism, Down Syndrome, and other rare genetic disorders. She has played an important role in the Down Syndrome Inclusive Education Foundation (DSIEF)—a pilot study on the inclusion of Down Syndrome in a mainstream kindergarten setting, where her phonic gesture system is being trialled as a support for children with verbal dyspraxia. Having received the Bromilow Downing Clinical Award for the student with the highest clinical ability, she began practicing at Tygerberg and Red Cross Children’s Hospital before opening her own multidisciplinary private practice ‘The Word Shop’, which offers support to patients and their families. Her insatiable quest for knowledge resulted in her obtaining a diploma in Astrology, followed by Level 1 Psycho-phonetics and Makaton Gesture System Accreditation and more recently her completion in the Soul Collage facilitators course. These, along with her interest in personal development led her to enrol in the Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Master’s Program through the Alef Trust, which she is currently pursuing.
Alef Trust provides transformative graduate programmes and open learning courses in consciousness, spirituality and transpersonal psychology. These programmes aim to serve the emergence of new paradigm science, nurturing the development of human consciousness and culture.

Email: info@aleftrust.org
www.aleftrust.org