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Edited by Gregory M. Nixon, Ph.D.



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Cover painting by Tobi Zausner: *The Philosopher's Stone*

This issue is edited by Gregory M. Nixon, JCER Editor-at-Large

Editor's Introduction Transcending Self-Consciousness

Gregory M. Nixon*

What is this thing we each call "I" and consider the eye of consciousness, that which beholds objects in the world and objects in our minds? This inner perceiver seems to be the same *I* who calls forth memories or images at will, the *I* who feels and determines whether to act on those feelings or suppress them, as well as the *I* who worries and makes plans and attempts to avoid those worries and act on those plans. Am I the subject, thus the source, of my awareness, just as you are the subject and source of your awareness? If this is the case, it is likely impossible to be conscious without the self (yours or mine), the eye of consciousness, and it must certainly not be desirable, for such a consciousness would have no focal point, no self-that-is-conscious to guide it, so it would be cast adrift on wide and wild sea like a boat that has broken from its anchor. Without self-enclosure, "We shall go mad no doubt and die that way," as Robert Graves (1927/1966) expressed it.

Graves was, however, referring to the loss of language. I find it intriguing to observe how intimate is the association among language, culture, and self (and by this latter term, I refer explicitly to self-consciousness). It is as though they are scions from the same root. Here's the lines in Graves' "The Cool Web" that precede the above:

There's a cool web of language winds us in,
Retreat from too much joy or too much fear:
We grow sea-green at last and coldly die
In brinness and volubility.

But if we let our tongues lose self-possession,
Throwing off language and its watery clasp
Before our death, instead of when death comes,
Facing the wide glare of the children's day,
Facing the rose, the dark sky and the drums,
We shall go mad no doubt and die that way.

Graves sees language as a cool web that filters us "from too much joy or too much fear". Without it, we would be open to uncultivated, animal awareness in the moment, similar to the unmediated awareness of children. Presumably the mediation of language has gives us a cool distance from the intensity of being; it allows us to gain much control over our environment as well binding our own untamed emotions. He indicates that by "throwing off language and its watery

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clasp”, we would also “lose self-possession” and apparently go mad and die as a result. Of course, Graves is likely writing with the irony of the modernist poet, smiling grimly or perhaps sadly at our distance from raw experience.

I chose the excerpt from this poem since it so directly expresses our own distance from what some refer to as *raw experience* or, contrarily *pure consciousness*, or, more simply, as *being* or *the real* (though in each there are layers of complexity not dealt with here). Oh, we are still animals and all of us have been children, so we have experienced unfettered, reactive awareness within the context of our species. We, *ourselves*, remain nested within such open-ended awareness, yet we are different: we have developed a new context within the larger context of embodied being, a context that reduces natural awareness while increasing cultural consciousness (otherwise known as self-consciousness).

I am telling you this by writing these words on this page with my iMac keyboard, which you are reading because you have spent time learning to do so, and this is not even to mention the complex cultural knowledge that has gone into building the computer whose screen you’re looking at or the creating the journal you hold in your hands. We interact through a mediated environment (so *the media* itself becomes our new environment) made of inventions and symbols. We do not see, smell, hear or touch each other so have become, for all intents and purposes, disembodied writing and reading programs. Our selfhood is entirely representational, our context for being radically divorced from nature but just as radically expanded into the lived reality of cultural symbol and artefact.

As Robert Jay Lifton stated, “Culture is inseparable from symbolization” (1993, p. 13), referring to the distinctive attribute of human culture. We are the *animal symbolicum* (Cassirer, 1944), the symbolic animal that has become aware of its own awareness. We have been drawn into intersubjective mutuality – identifying with others within our cultural spectrum and, from that position outside our natural embodiment, have observed, conceived and named our own being. We each call it “myself” or “I” or “me”, and unquestioningly accept specific names most often given to us by our parents. Given time and consistent behavioural modification, we reify the *self-name* so that we mistake it for the reality it represents. We objectify our natural subjectivity, watching ourselves from the outside to make sure our actions or even our thoughts are appropriate. It may be said that we gain a self but lose the soul (in the sense of non-self-conscious awareness that participates in the world).

Let me clear, by *self* I mean our learned self-concept, what psychology once called *ego* – that which postmodernists recognize as a cultural construction and phenomenologists call self-consciousness. (I do not refer here to the self as the subjective perspective of a body or system but to the objective *concept* of that self.) Language and symbolization remain both the content and the boundary of self-consciousness. Language allows us to name our own embodied experience in an ongoing present and call it consciousness.

But here is the quandary — by naming itself, natural experience becomes an object to itself, that is, the subject becomes an object to itself to the extent that it identifies with other culturally constructed selves and names its own existence. One becomes self-conscious. All we directly know of consciousness is our own consciousness and, according to Zahavi (2005), philosophical phenomenology agrees that all human consciousness is self-consciousness, even when not recognized as such. One of the most important phenomenologists, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968), could see that the self, which we individually identify as our subjectivity, is in fact an object among other objects in an objective world:

The cleavage between the “subjective” and the “objective” according to which physics defines its domain ... and correlatively psychology also establishes its domain, does not prevent [the subjective and objective] from being conceived according to the same fundamental structure; on the contrary it requires that: they are finally two orders of objects, to be known in their intrinsic properties by a pure thought which determines what they are in themselves. ... [A] moment comes when the very development of knowledge calls into question the absolute spectator always presupposed. (pp. 19–20)¹

So our living bodies identify themselves *as* selves in a world of other selves, a world otherwise known as symbolic culture. Body-world awareness becomes relegated to that which we call the *unconscious mind*, the source of conscious selfhood, while the self assumes the role of conscious agent and believes itself to be the entity that perceives and experiences *through* the body and strives to be the commander-in-chief of all thoughts and carnal actions (which it never is). Selves communicate to selves, just as we are doing here, but it becomes very difficult, if not impossible to speak of embodied or world awareness since it is *by definition beyond definition*, that is, beyond the words and symbols that make up the very boundaries of the self.

In former times, when coherent culturally embraced religions or spiritual codes were accepted unquestioningly, transcending the self to be nearer to God or the Gods or to travel in spirit worlds was an accepted reality. In this case, it was clear what was beyond the individual self – a spiritual reality, but one still verified by the culture. In these cosmopolitan, modern, and postmodern times, no one has a cross-cultural vision of self-transcendence that is accepted everywhere (since global cultures now seed each other and few seem even willing to discuss anything *spiritual*). It now seems impossible even to conceive of any sort of awareness beyond culturally-determined self-consciousness. We have crossed the bridge from relational animal-world awareness into symbolic interaction and there seems to be no way out, as modernist philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1944) noted:

Yet there is no remedy against this reversal of the natural order. Man cannot escape from his own achievement. He cannot but adopt the conditions of his

¹ My thanks to Steven M. Rosen (2008) for bringing this quotation to my attention.

own life. No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience. (p. 25)

No way out? It seems we have indeed become prisoners of our own device. Perhaps it is true: we cannot escape the self we are or have become. Its very fabric is made of our memories (and narratives of those memories); memory tells us who one is, and one is the one who remembers. If we had an experience absolutely, totally beyond the self, there would be no observer, thus no one to remember the event, thus the experience would have happened to no one. Do such experiences take place?

Postmodern philosopher-psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan deals with the biological substrate with his conception of the “real”, referring, it seems, to raw, instinctive drives. Alan Sheridan, in a translator's note to Lacan's *Ecrits* (1977), explains this:

The “real” ... stands for what is neither symbolic nor imaginary, and remains foreclosed from the analytic experience, which is an experience of speech. What is prior to the assumption of the symbolic, the real in its “raw” state (in the case of the subject, for instance, the organism and its biological needs), may only be supposed, it is an algebraic x . (pp. ix-x)

Experience of the “real”, outside language, must therefore certainly happen but can lead to no new knowledge since it has no means of being recalled by the self. As soon as comprehension is attempted, the experience becomes symbolized, and the “raw” experience becomes transformed into an object of memory and assimilated into the past of the self. It is no longer self-transcendent experience.

But if the self is identified with self-consciousness, transcending it may not mean its obliteration, as it must when experience occurs without an observing self (e.g., in the case of the wild animal and younger children). Once selfhood has been attained, one need not keep self-consciousness at the centre of awareness (egocentricity). In fact, as I have previously suggested (Nixon, 2010), in times of personal crisis or under the spell of creative inspiration, our thoughts or actions or perceptions may spring from a source we, *ourselves*, had not known was there. Consciousness of self is temporarily ignored, so the body – the incarnate soul that is always in tune with the invisible natural forces – may itself act (in the way we call *spontaneous*). And, of course, there are the other times when such egocentricity is overthrown in acts of selflessness (as indicated in the article by Syamala Hari). In such cases, soul may awaken, with the self present on the sidelines, as it were, to bear witness, or as an organ through which one may communicate with other selves. Obliteration of self is loss of identity (as in death?), but transcendence of self-consciousness is possible.

Self-transcendence should not be confused with the self-transformation that takes place throughout one's life. One changes, often in unexpected ways, but the self still

feels it is at helm of action and is the guiding light of consciousness. The self may be transformed so it becomes more transparent or permeable, and, in that way, one edges towards self-transcendence. But absolute transcendence of the self would dissolve that self with original awareness continuing in an unfathomably intense present without a past or future. Awareness-in-itself could be said to be aware of nothing or of everything, for without differentiation there could be no difference.

But, *self-consciousness* transcended (as opposed to self-dissolution, so the remembering self remains itself remembered) could have metaphysical implications: Those who have cultivated the transcending of self-consciousness in life, experiencing it over and over again and gaining a measure of control over the awakening, may well be able to retain the artifacts of selfhood – memories – as original awareness leaves the body behind, that is, in death. Just as the electricity continues after the light bulb darkens, in either case, life energy withdraws from the body but continues as unbound dynamism, but, in the latter case of self as silent witness, the memories of a lifetime may go with it, perhaps to enrich the manifold of experience in that source, which, in this way undergoes change and learning. Without those memories, able to withstand such radical decentering, the self dies with the body.

None of this is to imply that the transcendence of self-consciousness is any way *spiritual*, that is, supernatural or out-of-this-world. Of those realms, many have written, but I have no knowledge of such things or of anyone who does. In fact, transcendence is less the discovery of new consciousness and more the reawakening to *old* consciousness. “The awakening is really the rediscovery or the excavation of a long lost treasure,” as the great Zen interpreter, D. T. Suzuki (1964, p. 179) so well expressed it. Further, transcending means transcending our isolated self-consciousness, not transcending the world or *nature* that made consciousness possible in the first place:

There is in every one of us, though varied in depth and strength, an eternal longing for “something” which transcends a world of inequalities. ... “To transcend” suggests “going beyond,” “being away from,” that is, a separation, a dualism. I have, however, no desire to hint that the “something” stands away from the world in which we find ourselves. (p. 196)

The transcending of self-consciousness, in this view, is to return to embodiment and its intimate intermingling with the natural world, and perhaps there is a further step — to finally transcend the conscious contexts of life and carnality into pure subjectivity yet retain the memorial artifacts of a self once lived.

None of the articles in this issue precisely agree with me on this. In fact, they are wonderful in the variety of understandings to do with the self and with consciousness – and with the transcendence or transformation of self or consciousness. I will

be the first to admit that I have been affected by each, and also that I have been humbled by what I have learned. My assumptions about selfhood, its construction, and its transcendence have been deconstructed and reconstructed, even as I edited, and I have had to modify – or open – my views.

How one transcends the self depends on the self that experiences it. Is it instigated or sought, does it happen by accident, or by an act of Grace? Is it common or rare? Is it brought on by the ingestion of psychedelic agents or by mediation or by being overcome by fear or merely by caring more about the welfare of others than oneself? Is it *transcendence* to experience a shift of perspective or dissolution of the self? In the pages that follow, each of these paths is explored in nine ways, each unique unto itself. None of them deal with absolute self-transcendence, which should be no surprise, for, as I've indicated, there would no longer a self or person to record or communicate the event. Many of them deal the transcendence of self-consciousness, my own included, but only two describe the ingestion of mind-altering psychedelics to catalyze the event. One sees self-construction from the ground-up, as it were, as a form of transcending a previous self that has disintegrated. One looks to acts of kindness to sidestep the illusion of self-consciousness. Two, at least, look to creative experience in the arts as a way to connect with universal spontaneity, but in very different ways. The others refer to what might be called spiritual experiences that, though thirsted for or sought, arrive unexpectedly, almost like a gift.

A brief preview of each follows, without giving away too much lest the reader feel s/he has already gotten the gist of the piece, thus depriving him- or herself of fine writing and an amazing narrative.

Christopher Holvenstot has contributed two articles. In the first one, "Modeling a World", he describes a recurring experience that must have been more wrenching to write about than it was to read (and it is wrenching to read). He periodically feels himself descend into such a state of non-identity that he nears catatonia. This self-dissolution is sort of self-transcendence in reverse. But he describes how he has learned to model selfhood by observing others and then becoming that self. In his second article, "Making Meaning", he tells of his involvement in an intense psychodrama workshop in which individual dreams are enacted by the group. Such interpersonal actualization leads him not only to new awareness but even to new ways of dreaming.

Milenko Budimir describes his engagement with meditation practice and how it began to change his life by allowing him experiences that can only be described as self-transcendent. It was good to hear from someone who has had such experiences as recently as the 1990s since it is truly amazing how many people had their peak experiences between the years of 1967 and 1972. And, despite this being called the psychedelic era of the youth revolution, many of those who had such awakenings in that time never ingested any psychedelics! It's as though it was a time when an

irruption of the sacred (as Mircea Eliade somewhere phrased it) broke into our world, as it has in other notable periods of history. Milenko has given me peace of mind by assuring me that such self-transcendence continues to occur, albeit rarely.

Chris Nunn is one those who had such transcendent awakenings in that late sixties-early seventies period that they must be called *mystical*, that is, they are imbued with an undeniable sense of “something far more deeply interfused” (to paraphrase Wordsworth) that is experienced as sacred and possibly even spiritual. For Chris, such experiences were occasionally repeated at other times, too, but with lesser intensity; however, by his description, this may be because they have now been assimilated into his personality and life-philosophy and are part of who he is.

Syalmala Hari takes a unique view and runs two parallel tracks in intriguing prose. In one track, she investigates consciousness – or is it self-consciousness? – by suggesting it is a product of the memory functions of the brain, thus unreal. She seems to agree with Merleau-Ponty that the consciousness we name may be more an object than private subjectivity. We are instead part of absolute subjectivity, even if we are too self-centered to know this. In her second track, she investigates her own experience noting how unselfish acts of compassion or kindness lead to self-forgetting or even selflessness, and in that way are self-transcendent.

Roland Cichowski compellingly describes his tendency to have mystical awakenings even as a young child. These awakened in him a thirst to understand why the doors of perception were opened and he began a lifelong quest. At first he sought answers from others, especially as found in books, but, though these may have coloured his expectations, in the end the profound mystical experience that shook him to his soul was entirely unexpected and as terrifying as it was ecstatic. Roland’s learning had prepared him to deal with the lifelong consequences of his natural awakening, whereas, in my own case, I had no concepts I could apply in the aftermath.

Phil Wolfson writes of a life of natural transformations that still continue today. But he also writes unabashedly of a plethora of journeys into other realities brought on by planned experimentation with a veritable pharmacopeia of psychedelic (mind-altering) or entheogenic (inducing spiritual awakenings). He even draws up a taxonomy of such experiences, both positive and negative. He is such a veteran of altered states and even spirit travelling that he might be considered a modern-day shaman. Clearly, he is not a whacked-out tripster but one of our wise men.

The most visually stunning piece is New York painter Tobi Zausner’s “Transcending the Self Through Art”, which includes 8 plates, one of which is on the cover of this issue and another on her title page. In her elegant prose, she recognizes that the source of creative inspiration is always *self-transcendent*, beyond the boundaries of ego. In fact, one must suppress the ego and its chattering to open oneself to the silence from which creative intuition or arrives. The receptive body must respond to

hints from elsewhere or elsewhen (perhaps the world itself) to give form to the whisperings of the Muses. We are honoured to include this fine work.

In the last piece, I gave form with painful honesty to my own life-altering awakening at 19 as the result of a very powerful LSD trip. My story is like Joseph Campbell's journey of hero (1949/1968) in that there is a *call*, a *series of trials*, a *victory*, and a *return*, sometimes followed by a *resurrection*. In my case, however, I was unable to cope with what had happened and my *return* was to a self now in such a state of disintegration that I was in danger of losing my way forever. My *resurrection*, as such, is still in process. This was not easy to write.

All in all, it should be recognized that no theory or philosophy is built entirely from abstract concepts or logical reasoning or experimental evidence. All of us are the speaking animals of the planet we call Earth, and we each have had experiences (remembered or not) that have guided our thinking and given us our destiny.

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Article

Transformations of Self and World I: *Modeling a World*

Christopher Holvenstot*

Abstract

Severe seasonal depression entails the yearly collapse and reconstruction of a functional, useable, meaningful world. This radical annual transformation provides a unique perspective onto fundamental conscious processes by illuminating the cognitive elements and dynamics behind the construction and deconstruction of self-models and world-models.

Key words: self-model, world-model, world-modeling, cognition, cognitive scaffolding, consciousness, seasonal depression, S.A.D., transformational experience, meaning-making, meaninglessness, empiricism, existentialism, absolute truth.

Transformational experiences are most often interpreted as mystical and are conveyed in a familiar narrative – the seeker, after performing the correct privations and meditations (or after ingesting the right chemicals) attains to the profound experience, a full loss of self, a vision unto the oneness of everything. The result is a sense of compassion that the seeker (now turned visionary) is compelled to manifest in his or her life. My own transformational experience is very similar: the loss of self, the experience of boundless space, and the arrival at compassion; but it is not the result of a choice to experience an alternative perspective. I am not a seeker. And, rather than a diligent struggle toward a bright shining moment of clarity, more diligent energies than I can possibly tally have been spent struggling in the other direction – crawling and clawing my way out of an interminable mind-state of no self, no world, no time, no distinctions, no objects, no judgments, no meanings. The truth of the matter is no one can function in that realm. It's a great place to visit but you would not want to live there. When dragged there and kept there against one's will, one must fight one's way out or perish.

My unwilling transformation occurs annually, is long and arduous, and has typically resulted in a full loss of self and the full deconstruction of reality. Though I am skeptical of all narratives, the psychological one gives a reasonable context for its explanation in the diagnosis of severe seasonal depression. My case, according to the clinical explanation, is exacerbated by the negligence and violence of unstable parents, by an extended period of

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overlapping traumas, but is probably most acutely affected by an unusually high degree of physical isolation in the period from my birth until my 4th year of life. Whether or not the clinical narrative can fully account for it, the experience I have is of a fully integrated world of meaning and interconnectivity in the summer that in the winter is replaced by a realm of radical meaninglessness and disconnect, a loss of feeling, a loss of a sense of self, a loss of familiarity (of place and people), a loss of recognition (of what objects and substances are for, including food), and, at its nadir, a temporary loss of the ability to physically function – a catatonic state. In the spring everything shifts toward unification and reintegration while in the fall everything shifts toward disintegration and non-existence. First there is a world, then there is no world, then there is a world, on and on, year after year.

The perspective I have after many decades of such transformations is one of deep empathy toward the entirety of the living world, and is a perspective that provides a useful analytical angle into the issue of conscious processes and dynamics – particularly the role of conscious processes and dynamics in the modeling of a useable world. Whereas most people effortlessly employ the hidden assumptions necessary to subconsciously create and maintain a seamless, stable, functioning model of the world, from a very young age I have had to be fully conscious of the construction of a useable world and I have had to remain consciously active in its repair and maintenance. These constructions become effortless in the spring and summer months when I feel fully caught up in them but are impossible to maintain in midwinter when after considerable struggle, I must inevitably surrender to the catatonic state.

Up until a handful of years ago, the condition had a distinct bipolar element. I could neither imagine nor plan for how my mind would be in the winter when it was summer and I could neither imagine nor plan for how my mind would be in summer when it was winter. The two mindsets are radically different and I could not see a whole year using either one. Until recently, the two parts of the year were never connected in my thinking. Many years of therapy were instrumental in overcoming that bipolarity. My therapist reflected my winter self back to me in summer and my summer self back to me in winter. I learned to incorporate the two mindsets into a single understanding of who I am. This has led in recent years to noticeable improvements, a gradual diminishment in the severity of the experience, and an ability to incorporate my experience of two radically different mind-states into a useful analysis of cognitive processes.

As a result of the cyclical and bipolar nature of S.A.D. and as a result of its extreme formulation within me, I have experienced the commonly shared world-model that seems so self-evident to everyone else, from the inside, and then the outside, and then the inside, and then the outside – so many times that it is impossible for me to hold the same view of

reality that others do. Though I would love to be able to, I do not and cannot hold the same assumptions. A lifelong necessity of having to fabricate a functioning version of reality on my own renders it more obvious to me why our world-models should be constructed the way they are, how they come to be constructed thus, and why certain assumptions work so wonderfully well. I understand the purpose of such a construction and I do not assume any of its conceptual elements to be givens or absolutes or inherent truths in the way that nearly everyone else does. By simply having to maneuver my given circumstances I have inadvertently become an expert in the art and science of world-modeling. Perhaps more keenly than others, I see the central importance of creature-specific world-modeling processes in the existence of *all* sentient entities. Seeing the vital cognitive dimension of awareness and intention as central in all life processes gives cause for a deep concern regarding the state of the living world.

It is quite easy to dismiss my perspective as a diagnosable clinical condition, which in a very real sense it is, for it would naturally interfere with anyone's ability to survive as an individual much less to function as a socially and economically viable one. My own survival is through sheer luck: of friendship, of circumstances, and in an odd, sad way I was quite lucky it started so early in my life. It is harder for adults who have never experienced major depression to contextualize episodes of complete disintegration, of complete emptiness, of absolute meaninglessness, which by the meager pseudo-philosophical standards of the prevailing market-driven culture is a shameful, unforgiveable failure – people kill themselves in the face of it. I have been contextualizing this disintegration and reintegration since childhood. I have solid habits to see myself through, and I have many well-worn methods for hiding my efforts, even from my closest friends.

This back and forth world-view transformation has innumerable downsides (to put it mildly), but there are two small upsides: a clear-eyed perspectival locus located a considerable distance from our common muddled workaday assumptions about reality, and, as mentioned above, a useful non-standard view into the function and dynamics of conscious processes and their role in the task of creating a creature-appropriate, task-appropriate, milieu-appropriate world-model. By describing the experience of this annual transformation I hope to illustrate how a view into these few upsides can have considerable value in the development of a field of consciousness studies. The perspective I am left with after 40 to 50 transformational episodes can be helpful in illuminating the subject of consciousness, primarily by providing an example of world-modeling that may prove useful in the eventual development of a basic model of the process itself. I attempt here to illustrate the transformational experience and the uses of the perspective it provides.

Please note that seasonal depression, even if it *is* the best way to describe my transformation, is inaptly named. The winter depression is one small portion of a cycle that encompasses the entire year. The day to day changes in this cycle tend to be small, slow, and subtle, and they do not become the concern of the clinical realm until the changes interfere with successful functioning, as it especially does at its midwinter nadir. In its most severe form it is not so subtle. I become functionally frozen. This freeze is not from fear or anxiety (although both play a major role leading up to my surrender to catatonia). I simply do not recognize my own body as relevant and I cannot make sense of the objects, noises, and textures I perceive. There is still a view from somewhere but that perspectival locus isn't attached to anything that can make sense of the physical space, or of time; nor can it recognize the relevance of a self/world boundary. The perspective is still from a kind of somewhere, but it can only be described as nowhere. It is not a place with shareable reference points. Were I not dragged to this mind-state against my will, it might look beautiful. I receive visual information from the location of my eyes, however, that location is not privileged or important or integral to the experience I am having in that state, and the information or stimuli is not of distinctions and relationships; the world is not ordered in a recognizable or useful way, it just... is. Had I chosen to be there, had I come in the proper frame of mind and with the pre-expectation of interpreting it spiritually, or even if I just knew that I could control the experience and leave it when I wished, it would indeed be illuminating. But because I have seen this whole cycle consistently destroy the momentum of my relationships, my education, my career, etc.; because it strips away all the things I need to be a human I have tended to regard it as a loathsome, pernicious sea of meaninglessness – a view of nothing, the void. The *I* is not there, the *world* is not there. Awareness persists but there is no context to latch it to, or rather the context *is* nothing, which is just what everything is when there are no distinctions. In such a state there is nothing to be done, no way to do it, and no available self to observe on its behalf, no available self to participate or to perform. Catatonia is the inevitable result.

This state can last from a few hours to a week or more and can recur a few times each winter. The time element does not register while I am in that state and can only be worked out in retrospect. While in it, it feels eternal, and that eternal feeling is what I most feared growing up, whenever I felt myself sliding into its grip. It feels like free-falling into a deep hole, and once I'm in it I will be there forever. And in terms of the logic of the experience itself, that is entirely true. From inside that mind-state it *is* eternal, endless, exit-less, and I *am* there forever – frozen, free-floating/free-falling – in a void.

But, by the terms and logic of the regular workaday world, it does not last forever. The first useful and very beautiful concept that arises in me, to stir me from these messy and debilitating episodes, is the notion of a boundary between my body and the world. I am

here. I am this and not that. This conceptualization arises in me suddenly and shockingly. And in order to persist as an entity, in order to maintain the self/world boundary, I must *do* something about it, usually something to obtain nutrition. A big problem arises. The doing has to be done in a particular matrix of phenomenal parameters that I have to work out from scratch – my mind is supremely addled, completely empty of content. I have to work out a matrix of *doing* suitable to what it is I find I am (a bizarre and impossibly heavy rubbery body, with a spine down the middle, long bendable limbs that are frayed at the ends, some of the frayed parts can grasp, thank heaven). Whatever matrix of doing I configure in relation to this entity must also be suitable to the purpose. The *doing* must effect the movement of this particular type of entity toward a nutrient rich environment. Like any lazy single modern urban male, I have a standing delivery order for southern fried chicken with mashed potatoes and garlic spinach on speed dial with a credit card on file. But nothing is familiar and nothing makes sense. Figuring to push the correct button, getting the corpus to the door, waiting for the downstairs buzzer, pushing the lobby entry button, manipulating the apartment door, the grunted interaction with a delivery-being, are all extremely complicated conceptually. I am not always able and not always willing. I don't always know the meaning of the objects, the history of the place, or who and what I am. I have to *become* a being and that being has to become an amateur scientist with his conceptual tools ideologically limited to the classical realm. I must coordinate the interaction of a particular kind of body with the phenomenal parameters of a particular kind of environment in a causal-mechanical relationship. I have to keep force-focusing the otherwise free-floating/free-falling awareness onto just this one particular corpus in this one particular kind of matrix of properties, to achieve one particular kind of thing – nutrition.

I must formulate and include the element of linear time because all the actions have to occur in a specific order to add up to a successful behavioral episode with which to achieve that nutrition. Push button to order food, body to door, listen for buzz, push entry button, open door, grunt, close door, food into hole, gnash with teeth, swallow. It can only work in that order so an idea of order is vital. The concept of linear order is my meal ticket, literally. I must hold onto this ticket for future use. There seems little room for failure and no room whatsoever for a free-floating/free-falling view of nothingness nor for a view onto its true opposite, the infinite phenomenal properties and characteristics that are irrelevant to the vital task at hand. Awareness must align with the body and stay there. The aware body must focus every available mental and caloric resource into a narrow tunnel-vision range of physical properties and causal dynamics. This range and this focus and this purpose (control, certainty) are the simplified origin of empirical science and I cannot afford to be distracted from its basic tenets, and I cannot afford to take notice of anything else... *except* for the *other* thing.

The only other very vital thing is that I must formulate and hold onto the notion that it is worth it to make the effort to get the corpus to the door, to get the food, to put the horrifying dead stuff into the horrifying hole in my horrifying face. In order to persist I must actively choose to believe that some larger meaning will one day reveal itself to put this grotesque and incomprehensible struggle into a more obvious context of purpose and meaning. I must choose to trust that the future will provide a good purpose and a good meaning for whatever is happening in the not-so-good-seeming present. I must have faith. Without any sense of history or future, without memory or hope, without any comprehension of how I could ever escape the small self-contained circle of illogic I find myself in, I must project forward to an unknown realm that I will never reach. I must project an imaginary conceptual matrix of non-specific meanings and purposes that will function to compel me onward. I must build an imaginary conceptual matrix in which hope is possible. Unlike the causal-physical realm that I am fabricating as I go and to which I am aligning all my actions, I do not ever need to reach this other theoretical realm or to fully understand the details of its inherently good meanings and purposes. The projection *is* the purpose. The ultimate utility of this forward projection is the imaginary *reverse* projection of meaning from this imagined meaning-laden future, reflecting positive meaning back here into the meaning-absent present. I can do this forward/backward time trick because I have just worked out a linear sense of time to perform the vital actions necessary for successful nutrition.

The timeline concept reifies the whole process. I can picture nutrition in the linearly defined future and I can use that future as the backdrop for the projection of positive meaning and I can conflate the two things (food = hope). And I have to do this. To get to the future it has to be formulated as desirable. I have to want it. *Me*, the organism that I now claim as myself (by aligning my awareness to the boundary of its morphology) must find a way to *want* to persist into the next few moments, and then the next... and this forward/backward projection of meaning trick is the tidiest and most economical solution. I have to build, own, and maintain the assumption that participation in this self-limited matrix of boundaries, dimensions, causation, and time is well worth the cost. If I do not do this I fall back into catatonia, remain unfed, lose my boundary, die. That is the alternative. Without a value-scale to judge my alternatives, I could make the wrong choice. I haven't yet got a value-scale and the choice is far too complicated for my simple addled mind. I project the working-out of the all the important details of meaning and purpose unto some other unreachable unknowable time and location. I defer the question. I assume for now that the answer from the future place and time will be a beneficent "yes". I choose the struggle of life by formulating and projecting an equation that pre-decides the choice of life for me. It is the simplified origin of religion.

In short, in order to live, the fundamental equation is this: I must actively align awareness with the self/world boundary of the body, I must coordinate my morphology in a causal-mechanical way, and I must project the possibility of meaningfulness to a time and place somewhere ahead of me since it is not available in the present place and time. Every year I must work this out anew and on my own. I must grope my way, initially without memory, without recognition, or habits, or mental resources. I have to rebuild the world from these few cognitive elements. It is exhausting and every year I think I am done for, that I cannot survive the eternal self-less, world-less state (which is true, the self that thinks I am done for is indeed obliterated). Every year I think that I cannot ever climb my way out of its grip (also true, within the circle of logic particular to that mind-state all physical and metaphorical actions become not just impossible and irrelevant but impossible and irrelevant forever). Every year I think I simply cannot do it (also true, nothing can be done in the eternal nothingness), and yet somehow I *do* do it. I eventually build my way back to the workaday world. Unfortunately there is nothing there to remind me that I've done it before or how I did it. And yet by logic I am not actually without mental resources. Though I have to work out the details of the physics and the meanings, I intuitively know I need to press the button for food and to get the body to the door and to put the food into the face-hole, to chew it and to swallow it. It feels new each time and yet an observer would see that I do have resources, assumptions, and habits that function on my behalf regardless of my inability to illuminate their source.

Yet it is useful to recount the process just as I perceive it. In the reconstruction of my world from a catatonic state a number of conceptual elements emerge as fundamental:

1. The self/world boundary
2. The entity described within this boundary
3. The awareness aligned with this entity
4. This entity's boundary awareness intentionally focused on a specific matrix of creature-appropriate dimensional space
5. This entity's boundary and spatial awareness intentionally focused on causal relationships within that space
6. This entity's boundary, spatial, and causal awareness intentionally focused on a linear-timed ordering of causal events
7. This entity's projection of the positive valuation of participating in the format for biological survival that is mapped out by these combined uses of intentional awareness.

Only with these fundamental *cognitive* elements in place can I begin to reckon with the details relevant to persisting as a living thing. Because this process began long before I had

words for what I was doing I recognize that these awareness types are not just linguistic concepts. I need this basic world-model structure, this matrix of interrelated awareness-types (and the concepts which represent them) in order that my persisting will not only makes sense as a purpose but is thereby rendered possible, and even inevitable. *Persisting* becomes the explicit purpose of the reality I seem to create from scratch, a reality that I make possible but which makes me possible in return. To persist I must create a model that creates a reality of its own.

A spectrum of values emerges related to the *persisting* purpose and the values become increasingly articulated and specific. Anything that supports persisting is value-tagged as good; anything that thwarts persisting is value-tagged as bad. Further distinctions must be made in that some good things are only good in certain contexts, certain amounts, certain times, certain situations, etc. I build a roster of more and more complex meanings that are fully dependent on space, time, and causality concepts and which are directly related to my persisting purpose. Objects and noises begin to make more sense when their values, uses, and meanings can be discerned in this purpose-related way. When the objects and noises begin making sense the context for the objects and noises, the apartment itself, begins to feel safe and more familiar. My body then begins to make more sense as well and my presence becomes reified by all the objects, noises, and contexts for things that are now recognized as relating to *me*, to *my* body, to *my* purpose, to *my* life. The logic and interrelationship of things, including the element of time, begin to take on a fuller and richer shape. The complexity and the feeling of familiarity of this realm slowly and steadily grow.

Over time, the recognition of objects and relationships is increasingly enriched in cross-pollinating counterpoint, and this triggers associated memories and emotional responses to things that also begin increasing in richness and complexity. Once these emotions, memories, inner voice, and interrelated meanings are in place and fully activated they begin to take over and have their own effortless momentum. I let myself into the flow of it. I let myself believe that the substructure of a self, plus assumptions about volitional capabilities, plus values related to these assumptions, and then the emotions, memories and interrelated meanings that accrue upon these, all combine to describe *inherent* features of an *actual* world rather than a self-fabricated mental construct self-designed for a specific purpose. For the sake of cognitive economy I invest in the model I make as if it were an accurate description of the world *out there*. A sense of easy movement, meaningfulness, and purposefulness arises, swells in intensity, reaches a glorious peak sometime in mid-summer, and then the thing arcs and begins to bend slowly back toward the other direction again with incremental losses and disconnections, becoming ever more debilitating as the winter progresses, and I am finally and unwillingly surrendered again to nothingness and

baseline catatonia. It is a tough fight in either direction, to build the world on the way up, and then to defend its construction and use against constant incomprehensible and inconsolable losses on the way down. And I have always, since I was small, to be building a reasonable facsimile on the side, a parallel world with which to fake my way through thick and thin.

Among the many things I had to figure out on my own as a child was how to fake it when the purposes, meanings, concepts and interconnectivity of things were not registering, which was about half the year. I learned how to build a facsimile cognitive structure that would at the very least allow me to pass as a member of the same world as everyone else. I had to pay attention. I had to observe and cultivate behaviors. I had to find a way into the logic of behavioral assumptions. I employed consciously and by force what others were employing subconsciously by habits and assumptions. It is an exhausting process to have to think everything through based on a common logic that I do not naturally possess myself; and so much of it seemed so nonsensical, yet it was far better to defer to what was given than to draw attention to myself by speaking up about the obvious flaws in people's assumptions. I've hidden this process and my perspective all my life as best I can by aping appropriate behaviors and responses whenever possible. But not having had a word or explanation or forum for it all these years, it was not a shareable thing anyway.

Because it is so gargantuan a difficulty, my habit has been to isolate myself in winter. The constant construction of the world and the necessary astute observation of reactions to my attempts at normalcy, all masked in secrecy and feigned nonchalance, are supremely stressful at a time of year when I have dwindling amounts of physical and mental energy with which to cope with basic functions. As the winter season progresses social situations become infinitely too complex to interpret and even the closest of companions that give such pleasure in summer start to slip away. I feel them falling away into a familiar realm of unfamiliarity, the winter place where the very same characters that so enriched my existence through summer become complex problems in exhausting equations I can no longer decipher. People in my life have quietly adjusted to this summer sociability and winter isolation without ever questioning me much about it. In the summer my nearest and dearest are perceived as fully integrated aspects of my own heart. By the midwinter portion of the cycle all people have become just skin, hair, teeth, un-interpretable noise, and unpredictable movement, which fills me with nervous fear and revulsion, and this is usually at a point in the cycle when I have the least amount of energy of the kind that is required to mask actual reactions and ape normal ones. I am full of such energy in the summer when I do not necessarily need it, and I am drained of it in winter when it would most save me from the humiliation of exposing my embarrassing, world-destroying emptiness.

The weeks surrounding midwinter are the most difficult. Though many people find Christmas stressful, I have found it unspeakably nightmarish, even in the presence of people I know to be truly lovely. But I can absolutely see, particularly why northern Europeans would require a bright and colorful midwinter holiday in which to assert a sudden culture-wide ethos of communal love, generosity, and interconnectedness, precisely when, in the grayest gloom and chill, we are least able to call forth those vital elements within ourselves on our own. We institute a means to enforce good cheer precisely when we need it most. My seasonal cycle, though severe, is just an exaggeration of a regular seasonal cycle quite typical for those of northern European descent. Many people notice within themselves an increase of vitality in the summer, a dwindling of enthusiasm in winter. Christmas, falling un-coincidentally at the nadir of midwinter darkness (with the vibrant use of lights and the colors of blood and verdure, the narratives regarding the birth of our salvation, the intoxicating nog version of mother's milk, free gifts on a magic sleigh, the incessant singing, the intense desire to believe in miracles, etc.) is but a thinly veiled survival strategy for a complex social organism that cannot hibernate but generally does not winter well. There is no other excuse for such excesses. Though I am usually too far gone, it clearly would do wonders for me were I only mildly fallen at that time of year.

Given this cycle in this clime, it is clear why northern European philosophers tie their understanding of nothingness (which more frequently arises in introspection at the winter season) to the bare, cold, dark, dead, ice-covered, winter landscape. Though meaninglessness is an entirely neutral affair (simply an absence of meaning) I can see how it would be culturally/geographically interpreted as negative, as an absence of life, as anti-life. I can see how our deep-seated assumptions, built upon seasonal rhythms and the cultural, biophysical, and psychological reaction to coldness and darkness, inform everything about the experience of a loss of meaning – from its perceived characteristics to its diagnosis and treatment. Despite the obvious fact that the culture itself (particularly in its present über-materialistic self-enthralled manifestation) provides the context in which experiences of meaninglessness would by logic inescapably arise, the cultural impulse is to medicate and isolate the errant individuals who blasphemously confess to experiencing it rather than to analyze the social forces and assumptions which create the experience and define its characteristics. Our impulse as a cultural unity is to proactively deny the possibility of meaninglessness by denying the legitimacy of the experience in others and quarantining *the crazy ones* who cannot sufficiently hide the reality of meaninglessness from the rest of us. The bulk of my own dilemma, though primed by unfortunate circumstances, has quite a lot to do with the culture's fear-based reaction to meaninglessness, the culture's inability to allow room for the legitimacy of that experience,

and the culture's inability to allow those who *can* comprehend the neutrality of meaninglessness to speak with any authority about it from the useful perspective it provides.

The philosophical limitations of the culture disallow us to comprehend and countenance it in its pure and simple form as a neutral space of no meaning – meaninglessness as the natural and necessary backdrop for the construction of all meaning. The culture is as yet unready to acknowledge a space of no-meaning due to an unwillingness to reevaluate the outdated notion of absolute truth. Thus, if I want my own experience to be understood I must transcribe it into one of two meaning-laden, meaning-inherent options that people can actually hear. And it must be in a narrative format with a beginning, a middle, and an end, regardless of the fact that seasonal depression is part of a common human and animal rhythm with a year-long cycle that has no beginning and no end. In order to be heard I can illustrate the change of states from summer to winter, starting in the full bloom of meaningful interconnections and ending up in the existential horror-show of catatonia, which has a distinct emotional outcome. Or I can tell it from the other emotional direction where I am delivered from the existential horror-show to a healthy normal(ish) experience of interrelatedness. People demand meaning-laden versions of meaninglessness; they require a context for no-context.

The difference between the narrative telling of it and my actual experience is that I am not in a position to take the emotional reading of either meaning-laden narrative version as the final fact of the matter – I feel both versions but I cannot assume that either the winter to summer or the summer to winter narrative provide the correct emotional reading and I cannot assume that either the winter or the summer mental state is either normal or clinical. I must, in my own life and perspective, incorporate all of it as standard issue mental states and dynamics, and in so doing I am more able than others to see the construction and deconstruction of self and world without the kinds of narrative assumptions, psychological reductions, and emotional interpretations that others would inevitably read into it. To survive my own cognitive dynamics I have been obliged to create an interpretive perspective through which I can comprehend the construction and deconstruction of a useable world-model in its entirety, without emotional reads, without the culture's fear of meaninglessness, and without the culture's hidden assumptions – the unspoken cultural belief in the world's supposed *absolute truths* and its supposedly *inherent* characteristics and meanings.

I witness the personal and cultural creation of preferred phenomenal characteristics, qualities, truths, values, and meanings from a unique perspective. I am fully conscious of it. I see the scaffolding of awareness types, the purposes behind this scaffolding, and the

meaning-making/meaning-projection processes with which we flesh out the scaffolding. All of it is necessary and vital to being a living thing. Our culture has very confused and complex self-deluding subterfuges regarding all aspects of this world-modeling process, particularly as regards meaning-making. We pretend we are not making meaning, that meaning does not exist, and/or that it is not important, while we simultaneously shape all our behaviors and goals based on the meanings we say are not there, are not important, do not exist, are not self-created. Because I am consciously aware of the processes I do not and cannot hide it from myself, or pretend I am not a part of its construction and projection, or pretend that the meanings are god-given or an inherent aspect of the external world. I can be both in it and of it. I can own meaning-making in a way most people cannot, precisely *because* I have learned in some respects to countenance meaninglessness. My experience has made me less afraid than most people to view the background *blank-slate* of meaninglessness onto which all of our personal and cultural meaning-making is being projected. In general, people pretend there is no such thing as meaninglessness (despite that every adult human has taken an occasional personal dip into its doubts, confusions, and culturally-predetermined existential despair).

In a culture-wide world-view based on empirical precepts both meaning and meaninglessness are purported not to exist. We prefer to pretend that we are not involved in making or maintaining meanings because that would indicate that the meanings themselves are not inherent to the world, and as rational empiricists we could not possibly value or respect any meaning that we subjectively created and communally projected ourselves. Our cultural fear of meaninglessness is actually nothing more than a well-hidden fear of disappointed expectations: as a culture we naively expect *inherent* meaningfulness just as we naively expect *absolute* truths. The unspoken fear is that we could not possibly weather such disappointed expectations when in point-of-fact a clear-eyed view unto the self-creation and projection of all meanings places the ball in our court as individuals and as a culture. We can take charge of the meaning-making process like never before, with conscious clarity, with pragmatic purpose and visionary intentions, rather than as a knee-jerk intuitive subconscious reaction to random historical events and circumstances.

My non-standard perspective is entirely useless for getting me through the circumstances of ordinary life in a market-driven culture, but it is very useful in one small, yet important, interesting, and contentious area of contemporary life concerning the development of a field of consciousness studies. An interest in consciousness quickly brings one face to face with questions about the nature of reality. Our only available prospect onto *any* version of reality (including the empirical version) is through conscious processes coordinated to achieve specific models of reality for specific purposes. Our experience of reality is co-

equal to our model-making capabilities, assumptions, purposes, and end-products. Unlike those with more standard experiences and normal psychological perspectives I can comprehend the basic modeling process from inside and out. I experience a seamless world of integrated meanings, beings, and purposes; *and* I experience the backstage cognitive scaffolding that goes into the construction of that seamless world. I see the process of world-modeling from the user's perspective (from within a successfully integrated world of substances and meanings) and I see it from the contractor's angle (in its incremental reconstruction from distinct components, from distinct incrementally-modified uses of awareness and intention). The transformational experience between *no-world* and *world* exposes the world-modeling and meaning-making processes and allows me the formation of a pragmatic analysis of conscious processes.

Because I am able to see myself modeling the world for particular uses I cannot hold the common naïve assumptions that many others do about the absolute truths of any of the conceptual elements used in composing a functional world-model. Due to conscious first-hand experience of the backstage cognitive phases that lead up to and inform empirical assumptions, I do not and cannot assume the precepts of the scientific endeavor to be either absolute or of a fundamental nature. Similarly, due to a fully conscious awareness of the backstage cognitive phases that precede and lead directly to the spiritual impulse toward projected meaningfulness and specialness, I do not and cannot assume that religious explanatory parameters are absolute or of a fundamental nature either. I see the back-stage processes which lead me to the pragmatic use of empirical and religious assumptions, I see the extraordinary value of these assumptions in modeling a functional world, but even in my most indulgent summer surrender to the beauty of the world they create I do not and cannot regard their precepts as absolute truths in the way that most others do. (And it is not for lack of trying.)

Moreover, I can see quite clearly how the empirical and spiritual explanatory assumptions would only confuse one's analysis of consciousness when empirical and spiritual precepts are *mistaken* as absolute truths. It is clearly advantageous for creatures like us to convert empirical and spiritual assumptions into absolute truths in the mind, to invest in them in the fullest and simplest way possible. This *absolute conversion* (the investment in assumptions as if they were absolute truths rather than pragmatic, contingent, made-up truths) is a way of making the world-modeling process automatic, subconscious, intuitive, seamless, transparent, and cognitively economical. By investing in precepts as absolute truths the assumptions work on their own, supported and reified by subconscious, habitual, life-appropriate behaviors. While the empirical and spiritual impulses arise to maximize biological and sociological survival, and while the assumptions behind them are life-appropriate (and therefore *good* assumptions on both our personal and communal

value-scales), they are not intended or designed as the analytical means to discern the truth of our actual condition or to illuminate the backstage cognitive processes, the conceptual scaffolding, the dynamics of meanings and purposes, behind all conscious and subconscious acts of world-modeling.

Our natural desire for a rational-empirical and intuitively-spiritual solution to the conundrums of consciousness compels us as a culture to project the empirical and spiritual avenues of analysis onto a realm of phenomena that fall far beyond the explanatory scope, purpose, and capabilities of empiricism and spiritual precepts. I understand the impulse to employ these two ideologies but I see the futility. Empirical and spiritual precepts are certainly useful as operational assumptions within the living world, providing advantageous causal-physical mastery of environmental circumstances, and providing an extremely advantageous existential *over*-valuation of the importance of our individual lives, our cultures, and our species – science and religion unquestionably provided us the control and confidence we needed to rise as a species and to comfortably exist as individuals. But they are not in the least bit useful in descriptions of our cognitive characteristics and dynamics. And like it or not, the cognitive dimension must now be included in any viable rendition of reality. Our fear of inevitable disappointment in our absolute expectations (the expectation of absolute empirical and spiritual truths) makes it all the more difficult to question the personal and cultural beliefs which forestall the development of a field of consciousness studies.

The discomfiting letting-go of absolutes, and the effect of this letting-go on the communal psyche, must be explored with honesty and clarity (and must be reinterpreted with more accurate and humane psychotherapeutic assumptions) if we are to move forward in our self-knowledge as a species, as a culture, as individuals, and particularly as an emerging field of consciousness studies. To understand the fundamental purpose, substance, and application of conscious processes in nature and in ourselves we must come to see ourselves as making models of the world that by their very nature are fungible, contingent, and artificial (non-absolute). And unlike in empirical explorations where *subjectivity* is the antithesis of objective truth, in consciousness studies we are obliged to embrace the fact that cognitive characteristics arise for no other reason (and in no other format) than to provide an autonomous entity with a *subjective* orientation in a specific socio-environmental configuration-space. To empirically eliminate subjective perspectives in consciousness studies is to eliminate the basis, the purpose, the dynamics, the format, the experiential domain, and the experiential product of what it is we purport to be studying.

This subjectivity vs. objectivity conundrum (which reduces to the mind/body problem in philosophy) seems formidable to many but is actually wonderful news. The culture's

energetic new imperative to understand our conscious condition compels us to finally acknowledge and validate our cognitive, psychological, emotional, intuitional, intellectual, interrelative, inter-accommodative characteristics which are inherent to the inescapably entwined relationship between subject and object. We are now obliged to set terms and values for these relational characteristics and dynamics wherever they occur, rather than over-valuing mere causal forces and material substances. We are also obliged to honor and utilize cognitive and psychological variation, rather than invalidating unique perspectives by empirical consensus. And we are obliged to celebrate the meanings, associations, concepts, and relationships we individually and communally create through our varied cognitive and psychological characteristics and points of view. Throughout the course of the empirical project these vital and compelling aspects of individual and communal experiential reality (arguably our profoundest resources) have been proactively invalidated, treated as unreal, and therefore grossly undervalued.

I support and commend JCER's efforts to engage analyses of our conscious condition through a variety of unique vantage-points. A view into our conscious condition is best explored employing non-standard perspectives since these shed the most light on our otherwise invisible *normal* world-modeling processes. Until very recently I had never shared my condition and my experience of it with anyone outside a clinical setting. There has not been a proper forum for it. I hope this very personal revelation of mind-state transformations will inspire and encourage others to share the private configuration and analytical uses of their own unique inner landscape. I thank the visionary editorship of JCER for conceiving a format that combines highly personal transformational insights with consciousness-studies-appropriate interpretations (very clever!), and I am especially thankful to Greg Nixon for providing a safe, supportive haven for such valuable and meaningful explorations.

Article

Transformations of Self and World II: *Making Meaning*

Christopher Holvenstot*

Abstract

A theater workshop, ostensibly about acting, turns out instead to be about not acting, yet answers a lot of questions about how to act in the real world – ironically, by exploring the world of dreams. This transformational experience provides a view into the realm of the psyche, and this view is used to highlight the inappropriateness of empirical precepts in the formation of a field of consciousness studies.

Key Words: transformational experience, dreams, archetypes, liminal space, acting, world-modeling, meaning-making, empiricism, Sandra Seacat, Pamela Scott, consciousness studies.

An unusual theater workshop proved transformational by unveiling resources for finding, reshaping, and realigning meanings that are a natural part of the psyche, available to all, and a vital part of being alive. In my first contribution to this issue I wrote about *world-modeling*, the central characteristic of sentience. In addition to making world-models we are also beings that *make meanings*. The two processes are inseparable. It is helpful to recognize that the basic conscious processes of world-modeling and meaning-making occur primarily at the level of individual experience, in private, in circumstances that we have not been allowed to comfortably share in the past (because of our culture's preference for the precepts of empiricism which invalidates subjectivity and especially all non-standard experiences). We have not been encouraged to think of these experiences and their analyses as legitimate, valued contributions to human knowledge. We do explore them in the humanities, but in a culture that takes its cues about reality from physics these explorations are often regarded as mere entertainments. We are now behooved to share our non-standard experiences and to form analyses from them if we intend to include world-modeling and meaning-making as fundamental components of consciousness studies. An important portion of the raw informational content for this field can only come from subjective experiences rendered with clarity for analytical purposes. Our own non-standard experiences provide a useful view into the purpose and function of conscious processes. One reason non-standard experiences are so useful is by virtue of standing out from the norm, and thus being recognized and attended to with the force of a fully conscious mind.

The realm of the theater is a natural place to explore world-modeling and meaning-making processes as these are its main functions – to create a believable world that a group of strangers can quickly lose themselves in, and despite the short duration of exposure, be impacted on a meaningful, emotional and intellectual level. Theater, when it is successful, delivers a quick and

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tidy transformational experience. Looking backstage at a theater workshop for actors can provide a glimpse into the source of that transformational dynamic. It is a human source. It is something we all have within us. It is something we take for granted. In the work-a-day world we agree en masse to overlook this transformational source within ourselves and within each other. In this 2nd part, in addition to encouraging others to share of their experiences on this level, I also hope to reawaken a few readers to the dimension of reality described here. But more importantly I hope to illustrate how we in the field of consciousness studies can acknowledge and utilize the same creative/interpretive dynamic of the psyche at a communal level to encourage healthier beliefs and behaviors at a global scale.

The personal transformational experience I hope to convey here was a gift from a good friend whom I met many years ago while working on a production for the Columbia Dramatists (I was directing, she was casting/producing). Pamela Scott is a true theater jock (producer/writer/actress/director/teacher). Despite my protestations on the use of her time (echoed by many other friends who know the high quality of her own creative work), her amazing and comprehensive talents are focused primarily on the training of others in the field. She trains actors in private coaching sessions, teaches classes at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and at T. Schreiber Studios, and provides comprehensive professional training in workshops for her troupe of actors at Aching Dogs, a theater company she created 15 yrs ago that is funded by the hotel and restaurant workers union and which serves as an unusual union-member benefit (a large percent of hotel and restaurant workers in NYC are aspiring actors who desire to improve and showcase their talents). In January 2010 Pam invited me to fill one of eight slots available in a workshop she calls *Acting Through Dreams Intensive*. The workshop is based on a formulation developed by the actress/director/teacher Sandra Seacat who has a long and illustrious career training renowned actors of film and stage. Sandra is known for using dreams and Jungian theory to delve deeply into the psyche of performers. She trains them to use this psychic gateway for high-level creative performances that are informed by something authentic from within, from a domain which typically lies beyond the grasp of our conscious minds.

I am not an actor but I occasionally write, direct, and design for the theater. I knew nothing about this course, not even the name of it, when I took Pam up on her offer of inclusion, which I did without thinking or hesitation. I have known her long enough to know that she is a miracle, expertly hidden by modesty, and that only an incredible fool would pass up any moment to be near her wisdom, talent, and unusual healing presence. Had I known the details of the workshop in advance however, I would have run the other direction (from sheer cowardice that I would have masked with well-polished, smug rationality). Having survived the workshop (and taken it a second time in 2011) I can report it has been the most transformative experience of my adult life and I feel its precepts and methods should be widespread and available (if not absolutely mandatory) for any and everyone. While ostensibly about acting, it is in effect a basic training in how to be a human being – how to be in-the-moment, attached, creative, authentic, and alive; how to recognize archetypal energies in oneself as well as in others, and how to take conscious ownership of these energies and reshape them to achieve specific purposes or meanings.

The realm of dynamics explored in this workshop is inherently elusive, is certainly difficult to contain by traditional narrative and language, and is usually destroyed by rendering its dynamics available to the easy reductions of the rational mind. An attempt to capture it here may only garner its author the dismissive scorn of those who will say that the world it describes runs too far afield of the assumptions and precepts of the culture's dominant view of reality to be of any real use. I write this anyway, as an act of purposeful rebellion. The elements and dynamics of the inner world revealed within this workshop do not fall under the scope of empirical method or logic, so they are not typically validated as real and do not garner the appropriate cultural value that we so easily place on material substances and brute forces. I believe that one way to correct the shortcomings of our over-investment in the empirical model is to rebelliously focus our minds on this ubiquitous and vital experiential realm, and to intentionally and rebelliously *over-value* what we find there – the interrelationship of beings and meanings that is otherwise culturally determined to be either valueless, nonexistent, or just glibly dismissed as not *really* real.

As I write this, my beating heart of gratitude keeps reminding me that this essay could just as easily be about my extraordinarily transformational friendship with Pam Scott who brought me into such a vulnerable and healing space of self-and-world re-exploration. My circumstances on the other end of this workshop look and feel so very different that I suspect I am born anew, into a far richer world, with infinitely expanded opportunities to create and enjoy whatever meanings and purposes I choose to explore. I have found a new creative freedom but also an awesome responsibility simply by waking up to the inherently interpretative aspect of my own memories and experiences, and more importantly, by waking up to the freedom and responsibility to shape the projections of my own future, which are projections based upon the qualitative interpretations of memories and experiences.

In addition to a new recognition of my own interpretive nature, I developed in this workshop an ability to recognize and engage a multitude of vital archetypal energies occurring in and around me. I am awakened to terrific sources of enriching, sustaining meanings. For these and other reasons I have since been calling Pamela Scott *Mama*, (she really has given life), and the very use of these ordinary syllables in connection with this extraordinary person (who now calls me *Son* for reasons that resonate within her) is not a mere theater-world affectation, it is one of the many tiny ice-berg-tip examples of the gargantuan shifts of internal archetypal energies occurring within me. Intoning these simplest of sounds now triggers a long-pent-up power of love and gratitude appropriate to the mother archetype. Because of an unwell birth-parent these same syllables had formerly only triggered fear, mistrust, alarm, vigilance, loneliness, isolation, apathy, and emptiness. Among other wonders, I hope to convey here how a host of these archetypal energies are ever-present, wildly mutable, and fully available for creative re-invigoration and ever-changing re-engagement. We are caught up in them all the time but rarely think to take charge of any of it. Typically we pretend that we do not own or manufacture or assign meaning, or engage archetypal sources; meanwhile, all our behaviors and reactions are determined by the meanings and symbols that we are pretending are not there.

In the realm of the psyche we are all built of the same stuff, but in a unique combination that provides a personalized filter for every experience. Authentic experience is always subjective, interpreted and felt. The empirical reductions of our experiences to mechanical parts, causal-physical actions, and spacio-temporal coordinates eliminate the core element of conscious experience from the picture we have of reality. We are not encouraged to recognize the realm of the psyche, much less believe in it. And we often leave the formula for our reality-filter up to fate or circumstances, to family and culture, and we take the experiential end-product as *given facts* about the world and about our own lives. The transformation I experienced in this workshop was the sudden realization that not only had I direct access to a deeper form of authentic experience, but that the tools of infinite transformational possibilities are ever and always right there in front of my nose. They are so much a part of me that it had been difficult to see them. I am in the driver's seat of an extraordinary journey that is being created and reified in every single instant, in every single aspect of experience. If our life-narratives seem fixed and unchanging and unsatisfying it is only by default, by our own failing to keep our past, present, and future a vibrant ever-changing living entity, by or own failure to recognize and utilize the realm of the psyche.

The same dynamic is at work at the communal level (the group psyche). We are capable of reinterpreting and reinvigorating our storyline as a community, as a race, and as a nation, and this changes the nature of our communal experience. We reinterpret our history as a way of shaping our future, by, for example, condemning in the present something we took for granted in the past, like racial inequity, thus reshaping a future that would otherwise be an ongoing example of the same inequity. With nations this is a lumbering, deathly slow, and while very important, not an especially creative or light-hearted process. Individuals however, can reinterpret their past and set new courses for their futures in a heartbeat, and with an infinite variety of interpretive criteria that is also self-decided. But we tend not to think of ourselves as in the driver's seat of so adaptable and exciting a vehicle.

The path to this realization is a strange one that I would never have thought to explore on my own; partially because the path through a dream workshop for actors seemed far too flaky for my formerly over-guarded self-image, but even more because the path goes directly through my own private wounds – a mine-field any sensible person would wish to avoid, particularly under the gaze of a random group of strangers. But even were I not rewarded for my efforts with a view into the creative interpretive nature of reality, I would have found immense value in the comparatively smaller reward of a new ability to tap into something authentic within myself. I have discovered the unpredictable and surprisingly integrated cleverness of my own psyche and this has given me cause to trust some deeper part of myself without fully understanding the intents, intelligence, ironies, intuitions, and playfulness which arise from this vast, inexplicable place within all of us.

The Workshop

Although there are many interrelated aspects to the workshop, the centerpiece of Pamela Scott's *Acting Through Dreams Intensive* is the dream assignment, dream analysis, and a staged production of the dream. We are given instructions on how to elicit an appropriate dream from our sleeping psyches by handwriting a request on a pad of paper before going to sleep on the night before the

first workshop session and then recording all the details of what one remembers in the morning. Even those who say they never remember their dreams or haven't dreamed since childhood are to their own surprise able to provide a remarkably detailed one for the first class by this method. The permission to have one and the intention to remember it are important aspects. There are two options for the dream assignment: one can request of one's psyche a dream about one's central life struggle, or request a dream about the role assigned you for scene study (before the first workshop session we've already been paired off into scene partners and assigned short scenes from a play to be rehearsed out of classroom but to be tied into the exercises and explorations within class). Ultimately, either choice is going to be about one's life struggle, even if it is through the safer filter of a bit of stage writing, because the psyche only speaks (albeit very cleverly and opaquely) in an economical symbolic language regarding vital real-time mind-state meaning-making orientational necessities.

As workshop members, the first thing we learn about each other is the content of each other's life-struggle dreams; and because we know we must stage our dreams using the members of the workshop we are sizing each other up for how well-suited each member is to play a specific aspect of our own psychological conundrum. Thus we enter into each other's world through the backstage door of the psyche, which is a bizarre and disorienting way to meet people and form a group, and which creates a non-standard dynamic, a group-level altered-state that lasts throughout the length of the six week workshop. We jump right into actively and pragmatically projecting aspects of our own psyche onto the other members of the group. We would likely do this anyway, over time, in a natural unconscious process filled with false edifices and bluster, but we are doing it consciously, quickly, economically, psychologically streamlined, for the sake of production value – we want the staging of our dreams to be as impactful and as emotionally authentic as possible and the correct casting can make or break it. And rather than simply casting each other by gender, age, visual type, and social clues, we are availed of the content of each other's psyche that we discern from one another's dreams.

Normal boundaries are blurred. Time also becomes blurred as a result because our concepts about it have to do with mapping empirically defined experiences in the present moment for individual reference. Because we are focused on staging non-causal out-of-time dream circumstances as a group, we quickly fall away from the regular world. But whereas one might fall away alone, as in daydreaming, we are all experiencing the same reality-distortion together and reflecting its inter-subjective reality back to one another in the same way that the larger culture determines objective empirical facts, by consensus (but in this case without the reductions and empirical phenomenal parameters). The members of the workshop reify a world of the psyche together, for one another.

The Structure, Details, and Mechanics of the Workshop

Although Sandra Seacat invites up to 30 participants, the class size in Pam Scott's version of the workshop is limited to 8 people who are hand-picked through interviews and invitations. Pam's intuition serves to construct the class from the bottom up by selecting a mix of people whose sensibilities would work well in combination and in counterpoint to one another. The workshop convenes three times a week, in four to six hour sessions, for six weeks, meeting in various

rehearsal studios in midtown and in the sanctuary of an unused church up in Harlem. The sessions convene in the dark and in silence. We come in, we lay on mats on the floor, and when all are assembled and stilled we are taken through a 40 minute long relaxation exercise which guides our awareness through every physical and emotional aspect of the body, starting with the soles of the feet, and ultimately up and out the top of the head where the ball of intensified self-awareness is burnt away in a flame that releases one from all worldly attachments, tensions, and concerns. The result is hypnotizing and leaves one in an unusual state of freedom and suggestibility. And while there, in the dark, in this state, we are guided through visualization exercises starting with a favorite beach or a place in nature that we are encouraged to explore in every sensuous detail within our imagination. We are then encouraged to engage this place in some small way by sitting up or standing up into this environment and physically moving through it, looking closely at every imagined detail, reaching out to feel and smell and taste what we find, and non-linguistically vocalizing an emotional reaction to it. It is important for actors to be able to visualize a space and time that may not be well represented with props and scenery. A specific place and time has to exist as a reality in the mind of the performer to such an extent that they *give* life to whatever scenery or props *are* available, and thus reify that reality for the audience.

When we have gained some proficiency and comfort in exploring an imaginary space (which is indeed difficult as it feels uncomfortably phony at first) we are guided to a specific place and time from our childhoods: to a family meal at a specific age or to an event or location with a specific emotional feel to it. These personal explorations begin with areas of safety but gradually we are led through more and more difficult emotional terrain. Ostensibly, the purpose of these explorations is to provide actors a means of instantaneous access to authentic emotional history, and to learn to inhabit these emotional reactions from within by engaging authentic lived emotions in their original configuration in the psyche, surrounded by the specific visual, tactile, aromatic, sensual details of the original location, time, and people involved. By grace of the defenseless nature of the hypnotic state, we are performing these explorations with a childlike vulnerability still intact. For the purpose of the class, we are encouraged to go deeper and deeper into difficult emotional territory, to explore that territory in minutia and to interact with the people and places that attended the emotion by verbally and physically reacting and exploring it, in the dark, in that hypnotic state, in our strange group-distorted psyche-supportive alternative version of reality.

Whenever I began to doubt my ability to do these exercises (or when my ego began reducing it to nonsense), my awareness would extend outward to my classmates, the new projected aspects of my own psyche spread throughout the room, each of them reliving the reality of similar emotional terrain. We can hear each other moaning in the dark, and sometimes our emotions would swell into a group emotion, a group reaction to a generalized notion of injustice, abuse, unfairness, dishonor, shame, etc, that we are each experiencing in detailed specificity in isolation. Thus, the group in the dark sometimes became a single hurt child in my awareness, or a single heroic child, or a single cherished child, depending on where we were led in the mat-work exercises and depending on whether I could open myself to the emotion in the room while also attending to the exigencies of whatever was occurring within my own remembered experience.

The archetypal similarities of our experiences and the inter-relational aspect of my own archetypal projections onto these people created a discernable blurring of boundaries between what we commonly understand as distinct selves and between otherwise distinct periods of time, like childhood and adulthood. The spatial and temporal order became more fluid, and to experience this fluidity in an inter-subjective way as an explicit group experience is at first disorienting and then powerfully reorienting into a new kind of reality with a new kind of logic.

Not surprisingly, there would be an occasional complete meltdown of a group member, a complete disintegration of self into a puddle of uncontrollable sobbing. Pam would console the fallen member and gently cajole them into the center of the room, turn up the lights, and have us gather around the broken specimen. She has the fractured person get up and sing happy birthday, in long protracted single syllables. Haaaa. Peeee. Birrrrrrth. etc. And each syllable is aimed at a specific person in the group, eye to eye, to effect a deeply personal and completely irrational communication of brokenness and pain to that specific other person. And then the next syllable is aimed at the next person, and then the next, until each person is engaged. The fractured person does the same thing again while adding a physical gesture to each syllable, like a jump in the air or a karate kick, and the gesture is repeated many times before going on to the next syllable. Finally the singer collapses in complete emotional and physical exhaustion into a chair. Pam hands this sweaty, tearstained, expired specimen a book of Rilke poems and has them open it to a random page and read aloud. And this is a lesson to all of us, for what comes out of this exhausted discombobulated person, who can barely focus on the meaning of the unfamiliar words, is the authentic depth of the soul for which the randomly selected words of the poem are the arbitrary and serendipitous vehicle. And yet the two are merged, the soul and the text. It is the essence of theatrical performance and the lesson is profound – for there is no acting involved – just a deep, vulnerable, authentic, and very brave presence to the words, to the audience, and to the reality of one’s own psyche (a dynamic of vulnerability which started in the very first workshop session when we had to read the very personal content of a dream aloud to a group of complete strangers). The Rilke readings we witnessed (and inevitably partook in ourselves) were exchanges that cannot be faked or fabricated or rehearsed or set in stone – it is a lived moment of vulnerability shared by a group – the actor is just a fulcrum or vessel, best emptied of design and intention, only there to manifest an authentic shared experience of the human condition. The actor just has to let go of all defenses and get out of the way.

So I soon found that this course is not about acting at all, but about *not* acting. Attending this course as a non-actor, I was soon shocked to comprehend that I have been acting my whole life, in every single interaction with others, out of fear of my own psyche, out of fear of exposure, out of fear of my own authentic pain and joy. The challenge was to comprehend and own this discomforting fact and all its gargantuan implications. So thus, on top of the pain of re-experiencing long-suppressed childhood traumas (and with a new adult sense of their incomprehensible injustice) I also found a powerfully sorrowful regret for having cut myself off from this legitimate and authentic part of myself, the part that *feels*, the only part of me that can inhabit the present moment as an authentic living being.

The flipside of this life-long inauthenticity-regret is that a new world of possibility is finally revealed, arriving full force, with its own set of questions and concerns: how now to inhabit the world; how now to seek out (rather than avoid) those experiences that engage my true depth and sensibilities, that trigger my fears and feelings rather than obfuscating them with the subterfuge of socially acceptable behaviors and the sycophantic second-guessing of other people's reactions? How now to be a real person, honest with myself and with others, in order to protect, assert, and experience my own authenticity, as well as that of others? Well this workshop, as it turns out, ostensibly about acting for the stage, while not actually being about acting at all, does in fact answer a lot of the questions it raises about how to act in the real world – ironically, by exploring the world of dreams.

The Dreams

The first half of each workshop session is devoted to the mat-work and related explorations of emotional terrain, and after a short break we work on the assigned scenes, aided with more traditional acting exercises; and we work on the analysis and the staging of our dreams. At the first workshop session we read the dream out as written. Our homework is to parse out all the symbols, meanings, references and hidden associations behind each word, image, person, object, place, feeling, action, and circumstance – to open up the text of the dream, and give it the fullest, deepest, most personal analysis possible. It is what actors must do when they get a script. In this exercise however, the script is from one's own psyche and thus, in order to discern the legitimacy of the interpretation of associations, one must rely on one's own intuition rather than deferring to a director's or writer's preferences. And this analysis is achieved by looking inward for a resonance between one's experience of the dream, the interpretation of associations, and the lived truth of one's own life. The interpretative process is a creative filtering and a creative magnification of a personalized version of the truth, maximized for authenticity and honesty, in order to use this experience of staging the dream as an externalized out-in-the-world reaffirmation of a deeper self-understanding.

Unlike when handed an unfamiliar text from an unfamiliar author, in this exercise one knows exactly when the analysis is wrong, and thus the exercise hones the interpretive instinct and lends new muscle and confidence to the application of the same instinct in the everyday interpretive necessities of life. By performing this implicitly necessary, typically subconscious analysis in a fully conscious and fully explicit way, one builds a nose for the sweet aroma of authenticity and truth wherever it emerges, and one cultivates an insatiable hankering for the delicious vibrant resonance that attends it. The authenticity of others resonates within us when we become open to it in ourselves. That recognition of truth is the essence and purpose of theater, where truths can actually be told in the liminal space where we agree as a culture to pretend it is merely play-acting.

Staging the Dream

I had taken my friend up on her offer of a space in the workshop without it fully registering as a solid commitment and I quickly forgot about it. Because of rather severe seasonal depression my mind is fuzzy and dull in winter, interfering with normal kinds of thinking and planning, and I usually isolate myself to wait it out. When I got the dream assignment via e-mail I was at a friend's

house in Barbados where the sunlight can sometimes help mitigate my mind's winter despair. The dream I had that night was on the surface of it a typical travel-anxiety dream. I suddenly had to get back to New York the next day for the workshop and I dreamt I was driving the rental-car back to the airport at breakneck speed when an animal stepped out into the road. I swerved to miss it and swerved some more to miss some other cars, which I did successfully, but I crashed anyway, into a wall, and the windshield shattered and ended up in a million pieces in the back seat. I was stunned to find that my body was completely unhurt and I quickly jumped out, opened the back door, and began cleaning out the broken glass. This made my hands bleed but I was untroubled by this and in too much of a hurry. I was mesmerized by the beauty and luxury of the pale blue-gray upholstery of the back seat and the pale blue gray plush carpet on the car floor, all in subtle contrast to the beautiful green edge of the glass pieces with their sharp, hard-edged shapes – but all so calm and beautiful, like the ocean and the sky combined.

I tried to ignore the visual violence of the red blood on my finger tips. I cleaned up the glass, sped to the airport with an open windshield, hopped onto the plane, and was soon staring out a portal (made of *two* layers of glass) thinking to myself about what just happened. With horror I realized that I might not have got all the glass up from the rental car and that the next renter might have kids, and that these kids might feel between the upholstered seat and back cushions for coins as I had done at that age, and they might inadvertently slice up their delicate fingers on the glass pieces I had failed to remove. I saw in my mind's eye in the dream the children's wounds, heard their screams, saw their parents' panicked expressions, all the while staring out the jet window at the sea and sky and clouds. I panicked. I tried to remember if I had been thorough in my efforts, but I had been in such a hurry, and my mind had been wandering to the beauty of the colors and textures. I wanted to trust that I had done a careful job, but I couldn't maintain that thought with any comforting certainty. I realized as I stared out the jet window at sky and water that not only was I theoretically both guilty and not guilty (because both scenarios could still play out wherein children are either injured or uninjured), but that in reality, and inescapably for all time, I *am* both guilty and not-guilty, hurt and unhurt. I woke up in a panic and bridged the world of dream and wakefulness with this existential sense of horror.

The full analysis of the dream would take up too many pages here, but it is important to the understanding of the staging of it that the animal was my anima (the feminine inner place of feeling and interconnectivity) that I was avoiding running into (encountering, and by engaging, inadvertently injuring); the windshield had been functioning as an invisible lens and barrier between me and everything ahead of me, but was in fact, upon impact, just millions of painful pieces that I was using as the filter for experience. The pieces ended up in the back seat, behind me, in my past, but they were still a problem to be sorted through.

The dream was a prescient one for I found that in the mat-work of the workshop I was having to explore in explicit and excruciating detail many long forgotten horrors from the preschool period of my childhood including my face being pounded into my plate whenever I didn't eat fast enough; being dragged down a hall by my cheek and ear whenever I got out of my room; being forced to drink a glass of vodka and orange juice and then being forced to drink it again when I vomited it

into the glass; my mother's face inches from my own, screaming at me at the top of her lungs; and sudden physical retributions for reasons I had to work out on my own. I not only had to remember them, I had to be there, in the exact pajamas, at the exact metal and Formica table, the exact smell of the kitchen, the exact view out the window of yew shrubs, grass and gravel, the exact inexplicable rage and hatred in the eyes of my mother, my exact fear and incomprehension, her hot drunken dragon breath, my desire to be held by someone, anyone, and the overwhelming feeling of destitution and hopelessness.

Like my fingers in the dream, these were indeed bloody explorations. Unlike in the dream where I could not feel the pain in my fingers, I was not allowed to pass through this terrain in the mat-work without feeling each episode fully, over and over, acknowledging the pain and owning the feelings as mine for ever and for all time. Given the moans and cries in the dark room it was clear I was not alone in surviving early-age turmoil, and this gave me the courage I needed to keep going. It helped to be a part of a larger organism doing this one very unusual kind of exploration, together.

A very beautiful dancer/actress in the workshop dreamt of witches who judged her and yelled at her so she turned into a giraffe – a beautiful, graceful, non-self-judgmental, contented, cud-chewing animal. So I cast her as the animal/anima in my dream and, though she had only to step out and stand there looking innocent and contented, she fleshed out this aspect of the staged version in ways I could not have imagined. And I still think of her in ways that are connected to the image I have of her standing there; like any good archetype she leaves a powerful residue in the mind as a permanent symbol. A very clever computer techie transitioning into acting had a dream about a tour bus that went in countless circles. It was an anxiety dream about searching for answers but it ended up on the same analytical path, over and over. So I cast him as me (my mind, my inner voice, the analytical driver of my car, the driver of my story) and he too added a flavor and depth that I could not have predicted or planned for. And lying under a set of four chairs, I cast myself as the nerve system and drive shaft of the car. My feet were up front as the gas and the brake pedals, and my head was under the back seat where there might or might not have been coins (which I interpreted as improbable unexpected pieces of good fate, good luck, and happiness amidst the shattered wreckage of the windshield – like the promise of treasure at the far end of a dark and dangerous journey).

All are in place and the performance of my dream begins. My animal/anima steps out on stage and the crash is conveyed by everyone (the group members of my extended psyche) screaming like the screech of tires and clash of metals. My analytical driver lurches and convulses and someone tosses a boxful of jigsaw puzzle pieces into the back of the car (which rains over my head). The animal/anima disappears (but the jigsaw puzzle is also of an animal image). My analytical driver jumps out and begins picking up the pieces. He's got red ribbons dangling from his fingers. He sees beauty in the backseat (my head is there) but he is anxious and distracted. He dashes off. I can see him flying away and then he is up sitting in a high chair staring back at me. (For direction for this part I had asked him to do sums and subtractions in his head to convey an inappropriate empirical analysis of an emotional situation).

All the people in one's dream (as well as the animals and objects) can be interpreted as an aspect of one's own self or psyche. An actor and an actress playing father/*me* and mother/*me* get in the front seat and two actresses playing children/*me* get in the back seat and begin fidgeting and playing. They reach down between the seats and there is nothing there (just *me*) and they go on chatting as a family. Then the children in the back seat reach down with red ribbons on their fingers and scream causing the mother to shriek and the father to panic and try to regain control of the car. Then they/*we* are fine again and the children reach down and nothing happens so they chat mindlessly and charmingly. Then they reach down with the ribbons on their fingers and scream and more chaos again, and all the while the analytical/driver (the *me* who is now on the plane) is moaning louder and louder. And then on cue half of the actors and observers scream *guilty* while the other half scream *not guilty* and the lights go out.

We are asked how it felt but for me there was too much to take in to communicate any of it – some of it to do with the dream and some of it circumstantial, only tangential to the dream. For example, when there was a family in the car I was aware of the fakery, my fakery, the theatrical fakery. I never had that feeling of calm family interconnectedness as a child but always pretended to others that I did have that for fear of being found out. I was very familiar with the sudden chaos in the car, but not the kind in which there was an underlying concern for my own welfare. Also, I remembered that when I was three or four my mother passed out while driving and we went off the road and crashed.

When all the activity of the scene was done and people were going back to their seats I was still stuck there in body and mind, in the self-pitiful mess of the back seat, under the chairs, the only trapped immobile part of an otherwise very dynamic scene of movement and mayhem. The stuck/trapped feeling was not an explicit part of the dream when I wrote it out and analyzed it but was now a more obvious deeper implicit aspect that needed some digesting, and which may not have been obvious to me if I had staged it some other way, by, for example, playing the driver/jet passenger myself. A moment's heeded intuition led me to play the vehicle's underbelly and this was the result. Lying there stuck in my own mess, a little claustrophobic, in a life in which only on the thin surface did I seem to be driving around, flying around, doing things with relative freedom.

From under the car, in the mess, it looked more like exactly what it was, nothing but entrapment, ego, nervous energy, and acting – running away, not taking the time to feel things, not attending to the beauty and complexity and reality of the mess that I am. Why didn't I sit still and put it all back together quietly, calmly, ritualistically, like the worthy and challenging jigsaw puzzle it is? Why was it so hard to see? A windshield is both clear (obvious) and invisible (unseen and incognizable). There is nothing new amongst this mess. It's all too familiar. I had been proactively choosing to see passed and through it all and to just keep going a mile a minute, crystallized, brittle, shielded from wind and feelings, only resting in movement, only stopping to think as the afterthought of an already accomplished exit strategy. What am I running from? Where am I going? When do I arrive? How will I know the place? Cliché questions, to be sure. But these were new kinds of questions for someone like me who had never been able to see a whole year into the future. So everything begins right there in the disorienting, discombobulated interior cliché questions posed

after staging a dream accident, with these beautiful ghostly dreamlike actors inhabiting this strange disorienting time-and-space warping workshop-netherworld that is neither theater nor dream nor reality nor fiction. I want to laugh *and* cry *and* scream WHAT THE FUCK simultaneously. But I do not. I get up and we stage the next dream in which whatever archetypal meaning *I* represent to my classmates is just as integral to *their* dream-world/real-world/psyche-world in this moment as they are to mine. I am aware of the awesome responsibility of representation. Whatever this is and whatever it is that *we* are, I am in the thick of it. Or am I?

There is a fork in this road. I have the choice to own the incomprehensible mess of feelings and impulses and uncertainties and responsibilities, or I can strike a pose as any rational analytical mind observing from the outside might do; I could tell myself I am rolling around in made-up theatrical nonsense. After a micro-millisecond of moral struggle, in which I decide I would be ashamed of myself for striking the safe analytical pose, I choose to understand that I am the substance and dynamic of this dream (as well as the larger dream of meanings and associations that includes the empirical world and this workshop), and all of it in return is the substance and dynamic of me. Even if I cannot name or describe this greater interrelated substance and dynamic, I choose the road in which all of this is more real and more immediate and more important than anything I have ever known, will ever know, and can ever know. The world one thinks one knows, the causal-physical measurable empirical world, is *nothing* compared to this, is not even a suitable blank stage-set since its parameters and percepts disallow the appropriate bending of time and space, and disavow all experiences of meaning, purpose, and connection. Show me the proof of this meaning-connected non-empirical world? Henceforth, I am all the proof I need.

I confess there were times in the workshop when I wondered what I was doing, why I was putting myself through the horror of it since I am never going to need to trigger authentic emotions for a stage performance; and then other times when it was obvious that I was being introduced to a dimension within myself and of the world that is absolutely vital to any future happiness (the improbable, unexpected coins of good-luck and happiness are only to be found there in this dark mess of a journey). With Pam's gentle hypnotism, guidance, protection, and encouragement; in this strange psychological holding space, bolstered by the examples of courage around me; I found myself in extraordinary circumstances, found myself (my self-model) to be composed of nothing other than memory, imagination, interpretive meaning, awareness, intention, and emotion. (A truly stunning discovery.) And not all of it was difficult stuff thank heaven; many mat-work episodes filled me with great joy that I can tap into any time now, like dancing cheek to cheek with my long-lost Grandma Holvenstot, kick-boxing with a beloved coach from my childhood, lying naked on a grassy plateau on a rocky premonitory overlooking Talisker Bay on the Isle of Skye in Scotland – a place I visited once in life but returned to time and time again in this class as a starting place for the imagination exercises.

Memory has an inherently interpretive characteristic and the interpretive lens of our immediate lives is recursively made up of continuously layered memories, so it is a difficult mechanism to recognize. It is all-pervasive and yet easily and thoroughly dismissed by the rational mind. But when one *does* recognize it one can take charge of the creative interpretive dimension of memory,

recombining the same events and circumstances with new interpretive criteria to create new emotions, and then projecting new re-interpretive possibilities for potential future scenarios based on the new meanings and emotions. Thus, in short, even a troubled past is an infinite realm of re-interpretive possibility, and the present can be built on whichever interpretive possibility suits the spirit of the moment and the purposes at hand – a spirit and a purpose which can best be gleaned with a new eye toward authenticity rather than an eye muddled with fear-based subterfuge and rational reductions.

One evening in the workshop, in the dark, during a mat exercise we were instructed to go to a moment in our life when we felt supremely happy. On the sly I opened my eyes to the present moment and I was dancing on the altar-space of an empty church in Harlem. The woman who had played my animal/anima in my dream had also opened her eyes was also dancing in the dark and smiling, and we both felt and confirmed for each other the full joy of choosing the real-time present moment to be our most happy selves. This seemingly inconsequential moment was a pivotal event for me. It had been incomprehensible to me to think that I could ever choose to be happy in the present moment (much less in midwinter, mid S.A.D.) or that I could accept, without guilt or shame or regret, the full measure of whatever happiness might present itself there. But I did, and thus can, and now do. My own lovely happy dancing animal/anima stands as approving witness for all time. Turns out happiness is not so elusive; it is a choice and a skill, and ultimately neither a very hard choice to make, nor a very hard skill to learn (or so says I from the easier, light-filled, lucky-coin-strewn end of a long, dark, hard journey).

Toward the end of the workshop, we performed the assigned scenes incorporating all that we have learned and experienced. My scene, in a realm of multiple overlapping synchronicities, was from the play *Proof*, a scene in which I had to hide from the object of my affection any evidence of my rational doubt as to the authenticity and authorship of the proof. Ha. And finally, for the very end of the workshop, we were instructed to perform individual rituals to sum up and crystallize for ourselves the personal impact of the workshop.

The Ritual

The ritual is not a performance in the usual sense. We were not obliged to have them make sense to anyone else in the group. They are internal experiences that incorporate external movement, objects, and meanings. The workshop participants, who are the projected aspects of one's own psyche, serve as internal/external witnesses. I performed a ritual to a soundtrack made up of clips from many versions of Radio Head's *Creep* ("I am a freak, I am a weirdo, I don't belong here...") starting with a children's choir version while I slept on a bed in the middle of the stage. The music changes to a screechy acid rock version of the song and I wake up into to dim light to vomit onto the stage a plethora of puzzle pieces, coins, pins, screws, keys, trinkets, tools, photos, dice, flash-card words, game pieces, miniature animals, a dragon, guns, bugs, etc. As I start to sort through the dangerous mess I let the long red ribbons tied to my fingers unfurl. Seeing the silky blood on my personal trinkets and random items triggers a feeling of really needing to vomit and really needing to cry. I study the pieces a long while, rearranging them and studying them again.

The music changes to an orchestral version of *Creep* and I waltz with my grandmother, who morphs into a series of beloved friends, while I simultaneously sort the vomited mess with my bare feet. In the rock version of the song I kick-box with my coach, and I combine the kick boxing and waltzing with driving and flying gestures into a kind of Charleston-like dance, which fits nicely with a goofy, happy swing version of *Creep*. I add the happy birthday physicalizations to the Charleston to create a dance in which I am slaying the dragon, letting go of all rationality, *and* having great fun. When I am fully happy and fully exhausted I put all the pieces into a box, poke holes in the box (for air, since it's a living thing), tie it up with the red ribbons from my fingers, use the "mine" flash-card as a tag, and place the box on the bed as a gift to myself. I sit on the bed right next to the gift with an arm around it like a lover. I stare out at my beautiful archetypal workshop soul-mates and listen to a bit of narrated music from Phillip Glass' opera, *Einstein on the Beach* (a Glass piece. Ha!) as the lights slowly fade.

"The day with its cares and perplexities is ended and the night is now upon us. The night should be a time of peace and tranquility, a time to relax and be calm. We have need of a soothing story to banish the disturbing thoughts of the day, to set at rest our troubled minds, and put at ease our ruffled spirits. And what sort of story shall we hear? Ah, it will be a familiar story, a story that is so very, very old, and yet it is so new. It is the old, old story of love."

"Two lovers sat on a park bench with their bodies touching each other, holding hands in the moonlight. There was silence between them. So profound was their love for each other, they needed no words to express it. And so they sat in silence, on a park bench, with their bodies touching, holding hands in the moonlight..."

The workshop ends in an excruciating way, with goodbye hugs on a noisy midtown street on a cold night, the too sudden deterioration of this unique psychological holding-space, and the startling return of the workaday world in all its mean, noisy, and petty details. Though philosophically considered an *anti*-structural space, what we had entered and created was in fact more structured, more intricate, and more vital than what we think of as the common structural space of shared empirical reality. As disorienting as it was to enter the shared psychic space of the workshop, it was far more disorienting to leave it. We almost instantly lose our connection to each other, to the archetypes and energies and meanings we represented to one another, and to the world we had formed in which such things meant something. Poof. Gone. But something of it remains in me by intentionally validating the realm of the psyche and by intentionally using it as a new touchstone of reality in my understanding of myself and others; and by intentionally asserting its reality in the field of consciousness studies which has fallen too much under the sway of brain sciences based on empirical precepts.

I intentionally remain aware of the constant presence of the fork in the road, the choice to follow meaning and connection and fluidity and authenticity, or the choice to follow the harsh unfeeling, unfeeling, meaningless certainties of the empirical world with its easy circular self-justifying physical proofs and material values, its inherent lack of responsibility for the psyche (mine, other

people's, other nations', other animals', the world's, etc.). Empiricism is a great cognitive tool for certain limited tasks, but as a world-view it falls short. It cannot acknowledge the psyche, connections, fluidity, joy, suffering, and authenticity, much less assign appropriate value to these. The values empiricism *does* assign (to material things) keep us running in interminable circles of debt and credit and responsibility to things and numbers rather than to relationships and meanings. Thus, empiricism really *does* decide the fabric and feeling of experiential reality when we use it as a world-view; when we use it as the deciding factor in our interpretation of reality. We are conquered by the value-distorted *structural* world-view of empiricism simply by buying into it and thus being divided by its commerce and competition, and by its unquestioned belief in reality as a reduction to parts. Our experience of psyche (which is an experience of archetypal and meaningful interconnection) is always going to be reduced to nonsense by an empirical logic that requires consensus based on measurability, repeatability, rational proof, material value, and the elimination of subjective experience. We are doomed to false values and unsustainable behaviors unless we rebelliously assert the validity of our individual and group psyche, unless we proactively claim authenticity and connection (to the moment and to each other) as the more vital and more truly real configuration-space of reality.

What I saw firsthand in this workshop is how even a random group of strangers are inescapably interconnected in this self-creative, group-creative mutable web of personal and culturally-common archetypes and meanings. We connect and experience each other by grace of ingrained archetypal meaning-making formulas. Thus, as meanings and archetypes are the substance and substructure of the space between us, whenever we recognize and alter the meanings and archetypes within ourselves it changes those around us. We are one soup. As we go about modeling the world and making meaning, the openings for interconnection, for fluidity, and for significant change, are there as ever-present fundamental characteristics. It is a helpful way to understand our human condition but these interrelational characteristics extend to the entirety of the living world. We are all in it, of it, at it, together.

In the field of consciousness studies we have come to understand that we can no longer restrict our explanations of reality to the world described by empirical science if we hope to understand our cognitive characteristics and the purposes, functions, processes and interrelational dynamics of consciousness in general. The successful development of a field of consciousness studies requires validating the non-empirical realm within each of us, a realm of conscious and subconscious meanings, purposes, symbols, conceptual associations, values, feelings, and intuitions that are the primary elements in any model of reality (including in the formation of the empirical model). Despite the fact that the phenomenal/psychological characteristics I witnessed in the workshop are a universal aspect of the psyche (of all psyches, central to the perspectival locus of all living things) we are generally forbidden by a science-dominated Western Culture to refer to the individual and collective psyche as the legitimate and decisive aspect of reality that it truly is. And thus we are thwarted from describing cognitive events and psychological circumstances in a way that would reify the vital dynamics of our relationships and validate the interrelational nature of our existence.

Because of our culture's belief-investment in empiricism's objective purity we are accustomed to thinking of the world as a roster of mechanical parts and causal forces: we reduce phenomena to basic components and accept that the *non-interrelational* reduction *is* the explanation. In a version of reality that actually includes our conscious condition it becomes obvious that any model of the world can only function for us when it is an interrelated dynamic of elements that have meanings and purposes *attributed* to them in conscious processes. The interrelation of components and meanings is an entirely cognitive affair (non-physical, non-causal) directed by intentions and purposes that are not included in our empirical assessment of an observable, measurable world. We cannot understand and engage the whole (non-reduced aspect) of any model of the world unless cognitive processes and dynamics allow us to proactively compose and conceive a meaningful whole from what is otherwise disjointed meaning-stripped parts. *Our interpretive nature is at the essence of any conceivable unified model of the world.*

The reality of my own autonomous interpretive interrelational nature is what I encountered in this workshop. When we recognize these elements and characteristics within ourselves it is easier to recognize their dynamics in others and then to recognize them at the communal level. We actively interpret our circumstances at a cultural level and these interpretations determine our communal beliefs that in turn decide our cultural values *and* their attendant behaviors *for* us. Thus, if we desire to alter our communal values and behaviors (which are proving unsustainable) it is best we wake up to the fact of our personal and cultural co-interpretation and co-creation of our communal reality; it is imperative that we encounter, acknowledge, and reinvigorate our individual and communal interpretive natures. We can no longer depend on subconscious intuitive knee-jerk reactions to plan a successful future for humankind nor can we let the momentum of science decide our future for us. Our common and usually dependable intuitions are misguided by assumptions about the world and about ourselves that are built into our culturally ubiquitous empirical beliefs – assumptions that shape our cultural memory as much as it shapes our potential future.

Modeling the world is a subjective creative interpretative enterprise, an enterprise that under the empirical precepts of western reality is itself delegitimized by an overvaluation of *objective facts*: facts determined by a process of communal agreement that intentionally disqualifies our unique subjective perspectives to get at an averaged-out version of meaning-stripped causal-physical circumstances. This empirical objective reduction has all kinds of marvelous pragmatic uses but has a negative side effect in the devaluation of the subjective experiences that actually compose and define our conscious condition – empiricism eliminates from view (and from our values) all the cognitive characteristics of reality. This is rather a big and pernicious and ultimately self-contradictory side effect: one cannot have *any* experience of reality (including of empirically defined reality) without cognitive characteristics and capabilities, that is, without subjective interpretations, personal and cultural meanings, conceptual associations, etc., which are integral to modeling a world.

From within the limited mindset of a physical-mechanical world-view everything *unmeasurable* is absolute nonsense and utterly valueless. In the expanded world of the psyche, everything *inauthentic* is absolute nonsense and utterly valueless. Those who choose power, control and

certainty rather than interconnection and authenticity are at a loss in this realm of the psyche because the essential elements of this realm cannot be measured, controlled, predicted, planned for, or exploited. Empiricists prefer to deny the existence of the psyche rather than admit to their own shortcomings, and the culture generally follows suit. Empiricism has many useful economic, medical, and commercial tie-ins. The goal is not to eliminate the benefits of science but to reduce our expectations of its explanatory scope to an appropriate subset realm of reality. To do that we must assert the validity of our conscious condition and extended our vision of reality to include world-modeling and meaning-making processes, we must create a version of reality in which the empirical realm is but a useful subset.

I mentioned *rebellion* earlier as a reason for writing this piece. We make our own world and we make our own meanings and thus we *can* alter the assumptions and ethics of the empirical world as a reactionary measure, as a group effort, if we so choose. One of the few places where a reactionary measure like this can easily take place is in the development of a field of consciousness studies. By proactively choosing to formulate our precepts and terminologies to reflect and reify a psyche-honoring worldview we usher forth a world-model that contradicts the psyche-isolating, psyche-destroying one confined to causal-physical precepts and terminologies. Instead of such useful remodeling the field of consciousness studies is falling under the sway of the physical sciences. The current operating model is one in which we understand the human brain as a consciousness-producing machine rather than understanding consciousness in a broader sense as both a vehicle and a process for all living-world interactions from cells to individuals to social structures to species to ecosystems. A more integrative interrelational understanding of consciousness in nature and in ourselves is the only way to fully understand who we are and what it is we are a part of. There's a fork in the road and we must choose now which path we want to follow. To sit and wait-out such a debate or to let things continue flowing in the empirical direction is in effect to choose the dominant physicalist path and to reify all the ethics and assumptions that attend this unsustainable, destructive and outdated paradigm.

Change of the kind that is now needed will only result from a proactive choice to overcome whatever the causal-mechanical world-model represents within our communal psyche (hint: an over-weaning need for physical certainty, for causal control, and for competitive advantage over resources and over other people and cultures). And yet, all of these deep-seated material needs and material defenses are the *effect* of emphasizing causal-physical parameters as much as they are the reason for setting such parameters in the first place. Our values adhere to whatever world-model we make and invest in, and then the model and its values drive our cultural behaviors in a single unified direction. There is enormous creative potential in just knowing this world-modeling meaning-making capability of the individual and group psyche. We have untapped interpretive powers with which to solve a wide range of conceptual problems that affect how we live and behave. The field of consciousness studies is in the natural position to illustrate a use of this interpretive dynamic by choosing as a group to adhere our values and beliefs to a world-model defined by the realm of the psyche, by the processes and characteristics of cognition, by the functional purposes of awareness and intention throughout the living world, and by the inescapable and undeniable reality of world-modeling and meaning-making. And we would only be doing our

job. Humankind now expects an explanation of reality that includes our conscious condition. The physicists cannot deliver this new formulation. Only by relinquishing control and certainty (and the mechanical model of the world designed to attaining these) can we engage the vital realm of the psyche, the realm of beings and meanings, a reality of world-modeling and meaning-making. By exemplifying a more realistic world-model the field of consciousness studies is in the position to define and crystallize the sustainable, interrelational, inter-accommodative aspirations of a new global culture.

Article

The Shock of the Old A Narrative of Transpersonal Experience

Milenko Budimir*

Abstract

Here I present a description of some transpersonal experiences that occurred as a result of meditation practices as well as reflections on those experiences. I connect these experiences with some historical precedents, particularly to sources in the Eastern Orthodox Christian spiritual tradition, but also to contemporary sources as well as some 20th century philosophical ideas. Lastly, I describe how these experiences ended up shaping a new worldview, the most significant and lasting being a deep sense of interconnectedness with the world. This sense of interconnectedness further lends support to an inclusive rather than an exclusive understanding of religious belief, and correspondingly a mystical sense of the world and humans' place in it.

Keywords: transpersonal experience, narrative, self-discovery, spiritual practice.

Introduction

This essay, thanks to the editor of this issue of *Journal of Consciousness Exploration and Research*, has given me the pleasurable opportunity to revisit some of the most formative episodes in my life, and to reflect on the experiences from that period as well as to contribute, in some small way, to the work of consciousness research. I'll be writing about some experiences I had as a result of meditation practices I engaged in during a few years in the early 1990s. I've always suspected that these experiences played an integral role in shaping my outlook on the world and life in general, but to date I have never reflected much on them at all. This essay gives me the opportunity to do so almost 20 years later.

The primary sources will be my memory of those experiences and the journals I kept at the time. Seeing as how what I am going to share here took place almost two decades ago, the narrative will undoubtedly be a mix of a partial reconstruction of actual events as well as elements almost certainly added in hindsight which may not be an entirely accurate reflection of the conscious experience at that time, but may reflect more the attitudes developed after the experiences themselves. A lot of this exercise, of course, will be one of constructing a narrative out of a few "data points." So naturally there is a great tendency towards smoothing out the rough spots in the narrative arc. But if I am as honest with myself as I can possibly be, then I think I can

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reconstruct fairly faithfully not only what was happening at that time but also how these experiences impacted my life.

The decision to record some of these experiences was likely due to their uniqueness and novelty and the fact that I was attempting to figure out just what exactly they meant and how they fit into my life at the time. Only later did I begin to discover the common elements that my experiences shared with those who lived centuries before my time.

The experiences I'll be describing took place during a period of time from the summer of 1991 to about the summer/fall of 1992, during which time I was a fairly typical college student in Cleveland, OH, formally studying engineering and its attendant math and science, together with a budding interest in philosophy and religion. I was just beginning that journey of self-discovery and the corresponding doubt and questioning of the accepted truths and worldview I'd grown up with and into which I was socialized. Prior to the summer of 1991, I didn't engage in any meditative or spiritual practices. However, after the summer of 1992 I did continue to practice a personalized style of meditation, although I didn't mention the experiences in subsequent journals.

In addition, my ethnic background bears mentioning as it most likely had an impact on why I became interested in meditative practice in the first place. Both of my parents are of Serbian descent and were born in Yugoslavia, which at the time of these experiences was beginning its descent into break-up and civil war. I am a first-generation American who was raised in a closely-knit community of Serbian immigrants, speaking fluently the language of my parents and their homeland while becoming increasingly aware of the isolation and provincialism that that upbringing could engender and even encourage. In addition, as the civil wars in Croatia and Bosnia began and family and friends became much more interested in the happenings in the region, and especially became more and more nationalistic in their outlook and expressions, I felt myself becoming somewhat isolated, existing apart from these feelings of solidarity with ethnic Serbs back in Yugoslavia. Consequently, it's probably fair to say that at least a part of why I took up meditation in the first place was to create for myself an oasis of calm and dispassion in the desert of heated emotions that I couldn't entirely understand nor accept.

The Experiences

I'm not quite sure when I first began to meditate, but the best estimate I have is sometime between December 1990 and the spring of 1991. And the primary impetus at the time was finding a way to alleviate the new-found stress I was experiencing as a result of my father's illness and subsequent disability when it was not clear what my future would hold, i.e., whether or not I would continue college or drop out and find a job to support our family. The result of this stress was muscle tension in my shoulder, neck, and jaws. I didn't know at the time what the cause

was, but a trip to an ENT specialist revealed that it was simply stress and a prescription for Valium quickly relieved the symptoms.

After the prescription ran out, my doctor suggested techniques to alleviate some of the stress, one of which was deep breathing exercises. A friend of mine mentioned that he, too, had had some experience with breathing exercises and meditation and that it had helped him calm down and better manage some of the stress in his life.

So the first form of deep-breathing/meditation I tried was what my friend had suggested. It took the form of lying down on a bed on my back, legs stretched out, arms at my sides, palms facing down and eyes closed. I begin by taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly and consciously. By “consciously” I mean being mindful of the act of exhaling. A useful way to stay mindful was to say to myself the words “in” as I was drawing breath in, and “out” as I was exhaling. That’s it. Just those two words: “in” and “out.” Even when the mind wandered and other thoughts entered my mind, I would recognize what was happening and slowly again begin to focus on the words “in” and “out” and gently steer the mind back away from any distracting thoughts.

I practiced this technique a few times a week with some moderate success. During the act of meditating and focusing on those words, I was indeed calmer and more relaxed than in my normal waking state. And even after the meditation period, which would last anywhere from 15 minutes upwards to an hour or longer, I was generally more relaxed and noticed that the familiar muscle tension in my jaw, neck and shoulder area was gone. This state of relaxation would last anywhere from an hour or so up to the rest of the day or evening.

However, one result of this technique was that I would often fall asleep, sometimes for an hour or two. Not wanting to fall asleep, I decided to try a different posture. This is where I began to meditate and practice my deep-breathing exercises while sitting upright in a chair. The posture here was sitting upright, feet flat on the floor, back straight, head facing forward, elbows bent, arms resting on either the arms of a chair or palms down on my knees. From this position, I would begin with the deep-breathing exercises again; saying to myself the words “in” with each inhalation and “out” when exhaling.

After practicing these exercises for a few months, and experiencing the kind of relaxed, lower stress states that they produced, I entered a different or new phase produced by these meditation and deep-breathing exercises. (Actually, calling them “meditation” is probably not accurate at this point because strictly speaking I was not meditating *on* any particular subject, theme, word or mantra. It’s probably more accurate to refer to this first or introductory phase as simply the beginning of some deep-breathing and mind-clearing exercises to alleviate symptoms of stress.)

The first recorded instance of this new phase comes from a journal entry dated July 22nd, 1991. As far as I can make out, this is the first such experience I had while in this meditative state, and, as such, being so new and different from anything that I had experienced previously, I thought it was worthy enough to be recorded. Here is the entry from that day:

While in a meditative state tonight, I reached the point in my meditation in which I almost lost consciousness of my physical body and was only conscious of my mind (or soul, or spirit.) ... Once out of my meditative state, I felt an overwhelming feeling of joy and love at this brief encounter with my soul.

A little more than a month later, I recorded a similar experience. This one is dated August 25th, 1991:

While meditating tonight, I experienced a complete loss of realization of the existence of my body and the only thing that existed was my mind (soul). After this, I felt as if the only thing existing was my mind and the room. It was a really strange feeling to say the least, and it can't even be described fully...

Note that in the first experience I explicitly stated that I "almost lost consciousness" of my body, while in the 2nd description I go further and describe the complete loss of body consciousness. Also, in the first experience I mention the post-meditative feeling of "joy and love" while in the 2nd description there is only a mention of the strangeness of the experience of losing consciousness of my physical body.

Then, not long after the experience of August, there is a transcription in my journal of a well-known and often-cited passage from Blaise Pascal that is said to have come after a profound mystical experience he had one night while praying/meditating. I can't recall where I found the quote, but here is what I wrote down at the time:

In the year of grace 1654 Monday, 23 November:
Fire

God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,
not of the philosophers
and the learned

Certitude. Joy. Certitude.
Emotion. Sight. Joy.
Forgetfulness of the world
and of all outside of God
the world hath not known
Thee, but I have known
Thee.

Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears
of Joy
My God, wilt Thou leave me?
Let me not be separated
from Thee for ever.

When I encountered this passage it obviously made a big enough impression on me at the time that I thought it worthy of copying into my journal. I probably felt that way because at some level it must have sounded a lot like what I had felt during some of the moments of ecstasy that I'd experienced during my own meditative practice. And I was excited that somebody else, living almost 350 years ago, would have described, in tone anyway, the experience that I just had myself.

After transcribing the quote from Pascal, there follow several pages of transcriptions from various sources dealing with spirituality and mysticism. Some of the sources include St. Augustine and writers in the Orthodox Christian spiritual tradition most likely from *The Philokalia*, a compendium of Eastern Christian spiritual writings.

While I don't know what the direct link was, I can mention that during the summer of 1991 I bought two books that influenced my continuing meditative practice. One of them, *The Art of Meditation* (1990) by Joel S. Goldsmith, I purchased at a small "New Age" store that sold incense, crystals and gems, and what one might call occult books and resources. This book had to be one of the first (if not *the* first) that I encountered which offered direct instruction on how to meditate, including everything from physical posture and breathing to what to read before beginning to meditate.

The other book was *Introducing the Orthodox Church* (1982) by Anthony M. Coniaris. I'm sure that the reason I got this book is because in my mind there was an obvious religious and spiritual component to the experiences I had had and so I was trying to discover what the religion that I was raised in had to say about these experiences. And there was one chapter in particular which focused on prayer, in which I'd underlined quite a few passages referencing the results of prayer and the need for prayer in human life. A lot of what I found in these passages seemed to me at the time to match up with my meditation experiences; the emphasis on the body and correct posture, the experience of being in a state of active prayer, the results of prayer, and a metaphysical framework with which to understand and interpret the meditative experience itself.

A few more direct quotes from the journals. Here is one with some more details dated January 16, 1992:

While meditating tonight, I experienced what I believe to be some sort of "vision" of light or some "light." This came totally involuntarily and at the

instant that I was aware of the light (which lasted for only a fraction of a second) I felt a sort of “energy” or “peace” or “relief” pass through my whole body. To be more specific, I cannot find a right word for the feeling I had, just that it was a pleasant almost “heart warming” feeling which could only have come from God. (The peace that passeth understanding.)

A few weeks later, on February 4, 1992, I recorded another experience:

While meditating tonight (for about 30 min), I again experienced that direct “light” or presence of a power far exceeding any of mine. It was so short, that it could be described as a flash of lightning, instantaneously accompanied by an undescrivable [sic] feeling of warmth and peace that filled my entire body and soul. Although these experiences are ineffable and to a large degree indescribable in words, I feel that still my rational side seeks something to put into words...

About 2 months later, on April 1, 1992 (no joke), I describe for the first time something of a roadblock in my meditative practice, even going so far as to cite a passage from Goldsmith’s book as a possible explanation:

While attempting to meditate tonight, I realized that I could not achieve that silence or peace very easily without trying to put forth an effort. My only possible explanation for this would be the saying from the book *The Art of Meditation* that our periods of meditation go through stages or cycles (ups and downs) where at one time we might be in a valley where we cannot meditate or remain in silence but that this valley is usually an indication that we are ready to move on to another plane of meditative experience. This seems to be happening to me at this present time.

Then, a few weeks later on April 16, 1992, I transcribed a passage from *The Philokalia* attributed to St. Maximus the Confessor:

The highest state of pure prayer has two forms... The sign of the second is when, in the very act of rising in prayer, the mind is ravished by the Divine boundless light (emphasis in the original) and loses all sensation of itself or of any other creature, and is aware of Him alone, Who, through love, has produced in him this illumination. In this state, moved to understand words about God, he receives pure and luminous knowledge of Him.

There follows no commentary on this passage. I’m sure the understanding and connection was complete for me and there was no need to state explicitly just what this passage meant for me, in light of the experiences I’d had over the past several months and being aware of, for the first time, this mysterious “light” which St. Maximus references in the passage.

Explanations: Frameworks of Understanding

Already toward the end of the last section, some amount of interpretation has begun to creep into the descriptions, which means that I was already reading spiritual and philosophical literature and attempting to interpret these experiences and assimilate them into either my existing worldview (whatever that may have been at the time) or to discover what role these experiences played in some new understanding that I was groping toward and which was very likely becoming more obvious to me every day.

Two sources were instrumental in beginning to shape my understanding of these experiences; the Goldsmith book and the Coniaris book which led to other sources of Orthodox Christian spirituality.

The Goldsmith book promoted a fundamentally New Age/Self-Help metaphysic. His was not an Orthodox Christian understanding, but a wider ranging interpretation which one might say encompassed a pluralistic Hickian view that all religions share some aspect of the Truth, and that no one religion has sole access to the Truth. This is evident in his speaking of “the Christ” not so much as an historical figure but rather as a kind of state of consciousness which the historical Jesus himself tapped into (and which is often referred to as Christ consciousness) and which anyone who practices meditation in earnest can also attain.

Complementing the Goldsmith book was the work by Coniaris, which led me to other Orthodox Christian sources that would be consistent with my upbringing and the religious world I knew most intimately. The most important of these was *The Philokalia* and another book I referenced at the time, *Christian Spirituality*, a collection of essays from theologians and religious scholars from both East and West about the origins of Christian spiritual practice from the beginnings of Christianity through the 12th century. Also, later, in about 1993, I began reading the classic of Russian religious spirituality, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, which tended to confirm what I had already picked up from reading other spiritual works.

Later sources would include some of the writings of philosophers who could generally be classified as existentialists as well as a few foundational theological ideas from Vladimir Lossky (1989), which remain to this day embedded in my integrated understanding of those experiences with my life and the larger world around me.

One of the most obvious things to notice is that from the very beginning, these experiences were understood in a religious/spiritual context and not at all in a scientific one. This is to be expected and entirely in line with my upbringing. However, it is not to say that my parents practiced meditation or that they had the same or even similar views on religion and spirituality as me. In point of fact, some of their views were for me rather foreign and superstitious, focused as they were mostly on rituals and charms and living with a certain fear of not doing the correct things and therefore of violating what they took to be some type of divine order which, if they strayed from it would bring about misfortune.

What I did see from them, especially from my father, was the presence of traits that might be called humility before a mystery. In my father, that showed itself in his daily ritual of morning and evening prayers. My father's side of the family did tend to be more religious than my mother's side, so that while I fought what to me were the overtly superstitious elements of their religious beliefs, the soil was fertile enough for me to begin in but through my own discovery process which drew from my meditation practices, my readings of Goldsmith, and the writings of the early Church fathers through the *Philokalia*, I was able to forge my own understanding of religion and spirituality which melded these influences together.

Later, after these first theological sources were absorbed into a newly emerging understanding of the experiences, I turned to philosophical sources. One of the earliest of these sources was Wittgenstein, probably during 1994. This is the time during which I first came across his writings both in formal class settings as well as on my own. And of course, one of the passages from the *Tractatus* (1922/98) that struck me instantly was the famous "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (p. 74). Saying nothing at all about meditation or spirituality, bringing my experiences to this statement, I understood it to be not only about language or linguistics but about the spiritual life. Particularly, the relation between those things of which we cannot speak (i.e., do not have the words to describe) and the consequent silence that follows that experience of realizing that we are in the presence of something which is a brick wall for our normal linguistic understanding of our world. This is exactly what my experience had been, and it also matched up with the spiritual and religious writings I had been reading and tended to confirm my emerging understanding.

As I read more from Wittgenstein, I began to see an emphasis on two points that lined up with my thoughts and experiences. First, an interest in and sympathy with a kind of worldview that I would call "mystical." This idea of the mystical isn't understood in the negative or pejorative sense of mystifying but rather a realization that our understanding of the world and our place in it, if one was intellectually honest with oneself, was wholly inadequate and primitive. In other words, when confronted with the vast mysteries of our existence and the existence of anything at all, the best we could do was babble as children. And this was expressed in his other saying that "It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists" (p. 73). And this I connected with Heidegger's insight that the first and foundational question of metaphysics is *why is there something rather than nothing?*

Closely related to this insight was Wittgenstein's emphasis on the limits of language and what this realization imposes on us. These two points, to me, were the keys to understanding how Wittgenstein's philosophical outlook could serve as a kind of philosophical confirmation of what I had come to know through my various meditative experiences.

After Wittgenstein, two other philosophers were of interest to me: Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, Heidegger primarily for the above-mentioned insight into the

origins of metaphysics, but also for his continued analysis of Being. On my emerging interpretation, quite a bit of his analysis of Being could be understood in a religious and spiritual context. In fact, it began to appear to me that certainly in some instances the word “Being” could be understood as a stand-in for some of the traditional aspects of the mystical experience of God. And thus, in a lot of the writing that I read, I got the strong sense of a mystical undercurrent running throughout Heidegger’s analysis of Being.

Then there is Jaspers and his notion of the Encompassing. This again, like Heidegger’s Being, seemed to me to describe one aspect of a certain presence of God, which in my mind was linked with the experiences I had during meditation. However, this “God” was understood not in a popular religious sense as something more or less understandable but as a mystery that we wrestle with and struggle to understand.

Another thinker that was important in this regard was Martin Buber. The crucial link with Buber was that his thought provided me with a vital link *back* to personal relationships and the importance of these, as a kind of being-in-the-world (like Heidegger’s *Dasein*) and not simply existing in a detached meditative state. It is as if he answered the following questions that I’d had trying to fully understand what these experiences *should* mean to me: “OK, now that you’ve had these experiences and felt a oneness with the universe and all creation, what now? How do you integrate this experience with your everyday, everyman existence of waking up, sleeping, going to work, having friends, loving family, eating, celebrating, mourning, dealing with conflict, love and sex, etc.?” While he certainly didn’t answer all of my questions, he at least pointed the way back to a kind of wholeness. And together with the other sources I had read and absorbed, I was ready to integrate these experiences back into my everyday life and my overall worldview.

Shaping of Worldview: Influence on Attitude

So the question now is, what was the most immediate or proximate effect of these experiences on my attitude and worldview? Probably the first and most important effect (and the one most closely connected with those original experiences) was the growing sense of interconnectedness I felt with the world. Now what does this mean exactly? It’s a bit hard to describe, but it essentially meant that I felt a kinship with the alive world; that is, not with buildings and roads and cars, but with the organic, biological, living, teeming world of life – whether dogs or cats, or birds or squirrels, trees, flowers, grasses, bees, flies, what have you. This entire world of life was somehow transformed from an objective out-there world that I had little to do with to a deeply felt kinship in our shared mortality and the sheer joy of wonder of being alive and conscious in this mysterious existence we found ourselves in. And this, in itself, is a mystical understanding of the world.

Along with this new sense of interconnectedness was a new-found sense of empathy with living beings. It is difficult to explain this feeling of empathy fully, only to say

that it is connected in obvious ways with the sense of interconnectedness with all of life explained above. And even here it is not so much explained as it is described. Still, I can try. So, I found myself not categorizing living beings as is usual for people to do, but rather sensing for the first time our similarities and not our differences. Now, this might be open to the charge of anthropomorphizing, but I don't think it's that. Recognizing that one has something in common with other living beings is not the same as ascribing uniquely human qualities to these non-human beings.

So, how did these new found feelings of interconnectedness and empathy reflect back onto my "human" world? As I mentioned above with the relation to Buber's *Ich und Du*, the feelings of empathy and interconnectedness extended out beyond the biological world to the world of human beings and human relationships. For me, this most directly manifested itself in my understanding of the wars in the Balkans. As I mentioned earlier, my immediate family was closely involved with and monitored the situation in the former Yugoslavia but mostly with an assurance (that to me seemed fairly irrational) that whatever was happening in the wars the Serbian side was free of any wrong-doing whatsoever and that they were most definitely the victims. As such, the reports in Western media sources about the actions of all sides, but mostly the Serbian military and paramilitary against the other ethnic groups, including reports of possible war crimes, were either ignored or simply brushed aside as propaganda about the Serbs.

For my part, even if only some of these reports were true, I couldn't bring myself in any way to dismiss them or condone them simply by virtue of an ethnic connection. I have to believe that my experiences in meditation and my change of attitude led me to question these judgments. What I felt most deeply was that it was simply not possible to condone these actions in any way, shape, or form according to my understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings. And so I struggled greatly with reconciling the acquiescence of those around me with my inherent impulse to speak out against what "our side" was doing.

In other areas, I began to see how quick people were to condemn or simply excuse the suffering of others as their own fault in some way and to relieve themselves of any moral responsibility to do something about societal conditions. So whether it was poverty or homelessness or drug or alcohol abuse or even people who committed crimes, there was usually a snap judgment and that was it. But something in me felt that this way of thinking and understanding was deeply flawed and inaccurate and could not be squared with the changed moral sense that I was developing.

Now, truth be told, I didn't alter my life immediately in light of my experiences and set out to volunteer and help in some small way to cure society of these ills. Part of the reason, I suppose, is that there was no such history of volunteerism or activism in my family history that would've made such action seem logical and the thing to do. What I did do, however, and perhaps what was the most open or live option for me at the time, was to begin to bring up such themes in social settings with friends

and family and argue about them, which nobody had ever done before. In short, I became something of a disturbance in a cozy, self-sustaining tale of correctness and perhaps moral superiority. And my voice was one of *“Wait a minute, what makes us so sure that we are right? What makes us sure that we are doing all that we can to fully accept other human beings as our moral equals, and not pre-judging them based on our incorrect and unjustifiable prejudices?”*

Lasting Effects

There are two other questions to consider: the long-term impacts of the experiences on my attitude and worldview and how I understand the experiences today, i.e., as phenomena of nature, spiritual phenomena, or largely a mystery.

In terms of long-term impacts, I can identify several lasting effects of these early experiences. The one thing I can say is that I have a strong tendency to see both sides of a dispute, and hence it is difficult for me (or rather largely unnatural) to be dogmatic about the correctness or rightness of one side or one argument over another. So the end result is that I find myself not being dogmatic about much of anything, or at least not reflexively and intensely so.

The really interesting question here is if there is in fact any strong connection between this attitude and the meditative experiences of long ago. One could explain this attitude a number of ways. For starters, my philosophical training may be largely responsible for this attitude and frame of mind due to the critical thinking skills acquired over the course of study and beyond. Another may be that this attitude developed over time organically based on lessons learned in a large and often argumentative extended family.

So why do I mention it here if a number of equally plausible alternative explanations exist? The best case I can make is that those experiences and the flashes of insight I gained from them into a largely interconnected world seemed to me to be the best argument against the narrow parochialisms and the small-mindedness that all too often makes up so much of our daily lives. So for instance, it just didn't seem to make much sense to me to argue vehemently over some largely abstract issue or problem when in the end what really mattered was how we treated one another.

Another belief and character trait that was evolving out of all of this was the importance of human community and sharing, as opposed to what some would say were the virtues of a grandiose and mythical “rugged individualism” or even “selfishness.” Here again, the realization wasn't sudden and didn't express itself in the urge to disconnect with my present surroundings and go off and live in some kind of utopian human community. The best way to describe it is as a gradual awareness or better still as a kind of rearrangement of perception.

In religious matters, I began to adopt a more inclusive rather than an exclusive view of religious beliefs and systems. That is, tied in with the anti-dogmaticism

mentioned above, holding to an exclusivist position with regards to one's religious beliefs, given my interpretation of the meditative experiences I had had, seemed to me absolutely untenable.

As for the question of how I regard the experiences today, i.e., as a phenomenon of nature, culture, the spiritual realm, or simply a mystery, I'm inclined to regard it as being a combination of all of the above. The side of me that was educated as an engineer, with studies in mathematics, chemistry, physics, and engineering principles, can clearly see and understand an explanation in terms of physiological factors such as brain wave activity, endorphin release, etc. However, as I've already pointed out, given my background and upbringing and the predisposition, one might say, to understand such events in a religious/spiritual context, it was no surprise that my first interpretations largely came from this point of view.

Now this isn't to say that those first interpretations were exhaustive. Even after I'd located similar experiences in the descriptions of philosophers and theologians and ascetics of the past, the experiences themselves remained largely a mystery to me. I still wanted to know just how they happened and why. Also, the emotions the experiences stirred up led me to believe that these couldn't simply be the result of some chemical activity in the brain, but that there was some deeper, spiritual significance behind them. The effect may very well have been one of reinforcement; that is, the experiences themselves first served as a stimulus to try to understand them in and of themselves and place them in some kind of context, and then secondarily helped reinforce the explanations that I eventually came to accept.

Once again, from today's point of view, I can easily understand how it is some combination of all of the above explanations. However, for me, I don't feel that it changes those powerful first impressions of long ago, and the way those impressions influenced and shaped my subsequent attitudes and worldview.

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Article

Background Motivations for My Views on Consciousness

Chris Nunn*

Abstract

I wish to show here that my theories, and my life in general, have been greatly constrained (though I would say enlarged) by a few, brief and unusual experiences. Equally clearly, the content of the experiences reflected to some extent my cultural and personal history. Can they be regarded as no more than a culturally determined curiosity, perhaps a bit like the dancing manias of the Middle Ages or the recent epidemic of 'alien abduction' experiences? My personal answer to that question is: 'No. The experiences truly reflected aspects of Reality that we don't often perceive and the culturally determined part of their content was just the icing on the cake – how Reality was able to express itself within my particular, very limited mind.' That's why I feel it has not been a waste of my time to try to build ideas that promise to integrate experiences of this sort with more mainstream Western understandings, for theories foster observations and, thus, sooner or later, fuller appreciation of truths about ourselves and our world.

Keywords: consciousness, motivation, unusual experience, reality.

I'm one of the lucky people - one of the approximately 40% of the population who can report having had occasional experiences that were quite out of the ordinary and could loosely be classified as 'mystical'. Such experiences are very varied (see, e.g., Paul Marshall, 2005) but are generally characterised as having a deeply numinous, supra-personal quality, often vividly remembered for a lifetime. Many of us, including me, are reluctant to discuss them because they feel sacred in a way that one instinctively likes to keep private. As experiences of this type appear to have provided inspiration for many of the millenarian prophets who have caused untold misery down the ages, the instinct for privacy seems well warranted. But our editor, Greg Nixon, has persuaded me that perhaps one should sometimes be more open, so here is my story and my reflections on it. I hope it may prove useful to someone, sometime, somehow.

I was an only child, raised in a particularly beautiful part of England (the Lake District). For as long as I can remember, I would quite often get feelings of unity with the world round about; I could melt into the sky or a mountain or a tree, overwhelmed by their beauty and losing all sense of separate individuality in the process. As time has passed these feelings have come less often in relation to the natural world though I think they have a lot in common with some of what goes with being in love, especially love of people but also of objects such as books or pictures. The latter feelings of course became more frequent as I got older. The practicalities of boarding school (from age 6) and

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subsequently medical school, career and children, certainly got in the way of all this but it never entirely died out.

Then, aged 27, something else happened. I was drug and alcohol free, sitting in my living room one evening after the children had gone to bed. I wasn't drowsy. The television was turned on, but I wasn't really paying attention to it. The only unusual thing about my mental state was that I was feeling deeply ashamed of myself for not having done something that I ought to have done. Quite suddenly and unexpectedly, a presence was there with me, invisible for it seemed to be located behind me, but enormous and benign. Words formed in my mind (I didn't hear them spoken) with emotional overtones like those of a schoolmaster encouraging a recalcitrant student – "Why don't you look at it the other way, you idiot?" At once, the room disappeared and I found myself before an enormous mountain, green and swathed with silver mists, separated from me by a fathomless black gulf. I became aware of innumerable other entities on 'my' side of the gulf, spreading upwards in a golden arc, also viewing the mountain and praising it. More soundless cognitions came. "That's the mountain of God; the gulf of infinity; the arc of created being". Awestruck, I started to say the words of the Lord's Prayer and they got taken up, along with my own essence it seemed, into the 'arc of created being' where they formed a sort of chant that I heard as 'ringing throughout eternity'. Then I was back in my living room, still sitting in my chair, with no idea of how much time had passed though it can't have been more than a few minutes.

Although I understood that this was the most vivid, remarkable and compelling experience of my life, it produced little obvious change. I never tried to induce a repeat via meditation or psychedelics as I felt that the whole thing had been a gift, complete and sufficient in itself. It would have been ungrateful and greedy to ask for more. Even during adolescent religious phases, I had never been much more than a nominal Christian and I remained such. My professional interests were in neuropsychiatry, psychosomatics and health service delivery. These did not alter. But there was perhaps an enhancement of my previous tendency to fall in love, sometimes unwisely, with all sorts of people and things – women, the disadvantaged, boats and the sea, above all working in the British National Health Service.

Twenty years on, I was successful professionally although, not surprisingly, my first marriage hadn't survived my other emotional entanglements. But I was getting increasingly unhappy at work as political meddling had introduced the flood of accountants and managers into the NHS whose principal achievement has been to convert it from one of the cheapest but most effective services in the developed world, into one of the more expensive but least effective.¹ They haven't yet reached American

¹ Rough figures are that in the late 1960s the NHS was using around 3.5% of GNP while the Western average was around 7%, and was rated 2nd (the New Zealand health service was 1st) in effectiveness. By the early 1990s it was using 7.5% of GNP and was rated 18th in effectiveness.

levels of cost and overall uselessness as far as service delivery is concerned, but may get there one day! Anyhow, occasional *Wordsworthian* experiences of unity with nature had continued over this period, plus some strange, apparently pre-cognitive, dreams – and I discovered a minor talent for finding blocked field drains via dowsing – but no further *major* mystical experiences had come along. Then, in 1989, various authors (e.g., Michael Lockwood, Roger Penrose) published works on consciousness that hugely expanded my intellectual horizons, which had become rather parochial.

I began to try to get to grips with the mathematical, physical and philosophical concepts underlying the thinking of these writers and started some experimental work to test Penrose's ideas. The next happening was that I got very ill with an abdominal abscess that turned out to be secondary to a colon cancer. For about six weeks during convalescence, I had a hard-to-describe feeling that I wasn't properly attached to my body – I was sort of half out of it in some way. And the main concomitant of this feeling was that I could *see* how everything in the material world around me is made of light. It felt as if I were perceiving a lovely, glowing reality beneath the mundane surface of the world. I've always subsequently liked those rather naff, fibre-optic Christmas trees because they remind me a little of what I experienced then. It all stopped quite suddenly one afternoon when I got fully re-attached to my body. The experience of this was brief but entirely clear and mildly unpleasant, like putting on muddy, dirty clothes after a refreshing swim. All other-worldly light disappeared, apart from echoes of it sometimes to be glimpsed as a setting sun lights up a hillside for example.

When I got back to work, something had definitely changed. I could go through the motions of diagnosis and treatment alright and could still empathize with my patients, but an essential 'connection' with them had gone. I had been the sort of doctor who could sometimes make people feel better just by being with them, but no longer. I had never been fully aware of this ability while I had it, but its absence was very obvious once it had gone. My patients didn't need the new 'me' and I didn't need the silly pseudo-market in health that the NHS had become. So I took early retirement and sailed up to the mountains and islands of the Scottish west coast with my second wife to 'start a new chapter'. My new found passion to achieve some understanding of the basis of consciousness travelled with us.

In spite of having been a more medically-oriented psychiatrist than most, I had never been able to feel that people are 'nothing more than a pack of neurons' in Francis Crick's (subsequent) phrase. It just didn't gel with my personal experience. At the very least, it was clear to me that social and other environmental circumstances contribute as much to personhood as does the gunk in peoples' heads. The computationalism and neural functionalism prevalent in academic circles when I left for Scotland had fascinating facets and ramifications, but I could never see these as telling us anything of central

importance about people and their consciousness. Ideas about quantum consciousness looked a lot more promising to me and I continued my efforts to get to grips with them.

As it turned out, the more I understood of the basic concepts the more slippery quantum consciousness ideas became. Penrose's Godelian argument for the 'non-computability' of consciousness was an early casualty.² The plethora of quantum mechanisms that were proposed, mainly in the late 1980s and early 90s, as bases for consciousness all seemed to me to involve physical or neurophysiological implausibilities while their very number and the lack of empirical support for any of them led to an increasing scepticism about their validity. Nevertheless I remained unable to believe in any view that did not allow matter to be infused with spirit or permit consciousness some sort of independent role in relation to 'its' brain. The progress of my thinking has been documented in a series of books (2005, 2007, 2011) and has arrived at an outline sketch of a view that I believe shows promise of being able to accommodate what we know of physics, neuroscience and ourselves, along with *transcendental* requirements.

Clearly my story shows that my theories, and my life in general, have been greatly constrained (though I would say *enlarged*) by a few, brief and unusual experiences. Equally clearly, the content of the experiences reflected to some extent my cultural and personal history. Can they be regarded as no more than a culturally determined curiosity, perhaps a bit like the dancing manias of the Middle Ages or the recent epidemic of 'alien abduction' experiences? My personal answer to that question is: 'No. The experiences truly reflected aspects of Reality that we don't often perceive and the culturally determined part of their content was just the icing on the cake – how Reality was able to express itself within my particular, very limited mind.' That's why I feel it has not been a waste of my time to try to build ideas that promise to integrate experiences of this sort with more mainstream Western understandings, for theories foster observations and, thus, sooner or later, fuller appreciation of truths about ourselves and our world.

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² Penrose had argued that mathematicians couldn't be using computation to perceive that some mathematical truths are true because of Godel's incompleteness theorem. However, Godelian limitations on what is computable depend on the number and type of axioms, implicit or explicit, in a formal system. So it seems possible or even likely that mathematicians may arrive at perception of new truths via a pseudo-Darwinian process of temporarily evolving new, usually implicit, axioms that enable the necessary computation.

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Article

How Often or How Rarely Does A Self-Transcending Experience Occur?

Syamala Hari*

Abstract

Almost always, the self is involved in our perception of the world, thinking, and actions, but it does momentarily step aside now and then. I describe below a few of my experiences of self-transcendence that seem quite ordinary with nothing mysterious about them and they are all of short duration. To explain how the self is present or not in an experience, I describe some properties characteristic of the self such as its sense of personal identity and ownership of action. Manifestation of these properties in an experience indicates the presence of the self and absence of these properties indicates its absence. In an act of observation, full attention paid to what is being observed seems to push every thought, including the self, out of the conscious mind and keep it fully occupied with the act of observation. A characteristic property of the self-transcendent state seems to be that one can only recognize such a state as being free from self, but one cannot prove that it is so because the outward effect of the state may be the same as that of an alternative state where the self is present.

Introduction

In this article I will describe a few of my experiences of self-transcendence, and among other things their effect, if any is noticeable, on my view of the world thereafter. Since words, like “self” and “transcendence” may be interpreted differently by different authors, as far as possible we will try to be clear about how we use these two words and others closely related to them. In describing my experiences, I will stay away from the notion of the soul and consider ego and self as synonymous.

We begin the discussion of my experiences with an analysis of what it means to transcend the self and therefore an analysis of related concepts such as properties characteristic of the self, self-awareness, awareness, and consciousness, rather than a personal experience. We do so because during the analysis we will see that all of us (ordinary people, not necessarily saints, yogis, philosophers, or monks) can and do have moments of self-transcendence although we cannot remain in a conscious state with no sense of self for hours together and much less days together or the whole life. We may or may not remember such moments because they are short and also because we do not introspect ourselves every moment to see if “I” is there or not. So, some of the examples we come across could be those of the personal experiences of many of us. I will describe below a few of my experiences of self-transcendence, but none of them is mysterious, or out of the ordinary life, or something *in another dimension*. Hence their effect on my life

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afterwards is also ordinary and I have no *awakening* to report.

Clearly, narration of a self-transcending experience is an exercise in introspection. For me, the word self stands for what we mean by “I” in our daily usage in sentences such as “I know that”, “I do not know that”, “I did it”, “I did not do it”, “I want to be a teacher when I grow up”, or “this is my house”. We do not consider “self” and “soul” as synonymous. The word “mind” stands for one that thinks where thinking is all the following: As long as the body is awake, the mind immediately records in memory a description of every interaction with the outside world and produces emotions such as joy and sorrow as responses; we call these records experiences. It can recall these experiences though not always. The mind has desires and goals, and plans to achieve them using its reasoning capability. It labels events as past, present, and future but the present is very short (even non-linguistic minds have reasoning and time-labeling capabilities to some extent). It carries on similar processes even in dreams although not rationally and without external (sensory) input. It can initiate the body to act. It performs all these functions with an awareness of doing so and with a sense of “I” also called ego. The mind is aware of the self also.

Transcending the self would mean a conscious state or an act where there is no awareness of “I”. This in turn, requires me to understand if there is a difference between being conscious (consciousness) and awareness of something and, if there is, what the difference is.¹ Hence, we analyze awareness and self-awareness first because we are not concerned with unconscious states here; both the self-transcendent state and one with awareness of the self are supposed to be conscious states. Then we describe some behaviors, including some of my own, in which the self is involved and others in which the self seems to be absent at least momentarily. We will be able to recognize the presence or absence of the self at a particular moment by recognizing properties characteristic of the self. Manifestation of these properties in an experience indicates the presence of the self and absence of these properties indicates its absence. Some characteristics of the self we will recognize are: creation of a sense of personal identity distinguishing itself from others, ownership of action, presentation of a distorted view of reality, attachment to results of action, and a quick reaction upon receiving the results of actions whether initiated by the self or others. From our analysis of some experiences, it appears that one can only recognize a state as being free from the self, but one cannot prove that it is so because the outward effect of the state may be the same as that of an alternative state where the self is present.

What Self is in Western and Eastern Philosophies

In philosophical literature, Eastern, Western, ancient, or modern, the self is sometimes interpreted to be the same as the soul (a non-bodily entity associated with the body) and sometimes as ego. Whether self-transcendence is possible or not depends upon the interpretation. Hence we first take a brief look at how the notions of self and self-transcendence

¹ Sometimes, some authors may not distinguish between consciousness and awareness depending upon the focus of their discussion. For example, the words self-consciousness and self-awareness are synonymous. Since self-awareness (being aware of the self) is slightly different from the concept of self although necessarily associated with the self, it is useful to define awareness of an object, mental or physical, and to distinguish between consciousness and awareness. Living beings have a set of abilities called consciousness and one of them is the ability to produce awareness as an internally experienced outcome in a particular situation.

are dealt with in Eastern and Western philosophies. An attempt to recall a self-transcending experience implicitly assumes that a conscious state without the awareness of self is possible; in other words, assumes that self is not the source of consciousness. This assumption seems more akin to eastern philosophies (particularly Hindu and Buddhist² philosophies) than Western philosophies in the following way. In Hindu and Buddhist philosophies and some Western philosophies, the self is said to be an illusion³. According to Hindu philosophy, the mind is not conscious! It only *appears* to be conscious, but there is a certain Consciousness (with big C and sometimes called the Supreme consciousness) different from the mind and matter that is the source of the sense of consciousness in our minds. Buddhism classifies various aspects of matter and mind and their interaction into *skandas* (aggregates) and postulates transcendent consciousness beyond the aggregates. A Buddha, that is, an enlightened one, is a non-aggregate being who is able to detach oneself from the aggregates. There are primarily two categories of consciousness: one is called mental consciousness which depends upon aggregates and the other is non-manifest consciousness unconditioned and unsupported by the aggregates. The former consists of mental perceptions formed as a result of contact with material world or perceptions of itself (self-awareness). Buddha consciousness, that is, non-aggregate consciousness or transcendent consciousness arises after withdrawal of all attachment to the aggregates. Thus Buddhism asserts that a state of pure consciousness not dependent upon the mind or matter exists. Western philosophies, particularly those that emphasize reason and scientific thought, usually do not seem to indicate the existence of consciousness beyond the mind although some of them may characterize the mind as immaterial⁴.

According to the *Gita* (Bhagavad Gita, n.d.), all creation is made up of two kinds of *prakriti* (nature): the material and the spiritual. Both living beings and the material world are parts of *prakriti*. The *prakriti* of the former is called *jiva-prakriti* and is conscious whereas the *prakriti* of

² The words "self", "I", and the phrase "I am" are used with different meanings in different religious works of both Hinduism and Buddhism even in ancient times. There is a lot more confusion in their modern translations. There are several branches of Buddhism and several interpretations varying from "no-self", "empirical self", to "true self". However, they all agree that ego is an aspect of the mind and that there is a non-bodily entity in a person (which we call soul here), that, upon death, becomes one of the causes for the arising of a new birth. Buddhist perspective is that consciousness does not emerge from the brain or from matter (Luisi 2008). In a dialogue reported here, Dalai Lama admits that in Buddhism there is an implicit recognition of the difficulty of defining what consciousness is, but that it is possible to recognize consciousness experientially and identify it. On the contrary, Hinduism explicitly asserts that there is a certain Consciousness independent of matter and mind; it is indescribable but can be experienced directly with no involvement of mind and matter.

³ Descartes (1641/1901) argued that phenomena manifest in one's experience are illusions because they depend upon sensory inputs to the self, but a subjective self is real because it is needed to experience the illusion. In contrast, Hume (1781/1967) considers the self as a bundle of perceptions and an illusion.

⁴ Descartes believed that body and mind are mutually exclusive substances; the body is a mechanically functioning system and simply the interaction of biological matter with nothing conscious about it whereas the mind is immaterial and the source of consciousness (Cottingham 1996). His famous expression, "I think, therefore I am" asserts that the self is the thinker, the consciousness, and the ultimate existence. Cartesian dualism is a subject of extensive debate by modern philosophers and scientists in various branches and led to the development of the so-called dualistic interactionism, monism, and dual-aspect theories of consciousness. However, neither the modern critics of Descartes nor his supporters separate self and consciousness. Prior to Descartes and ever since the Greek philosophers Aristotle, Plato, and others, Western philosophers considered the soul and self as the same; they were interested in the mind-body/world relationships and in self-development with regard to various metaphysical, spiritual, moral, and ethical aspects (Cottingham 1996). But they do not seem to make a distinction between consciousness and self explicitly.

the latter called *jada-prakriti* is unconscious and includes inert matter. However, one should not confuse the limited consciousness of living beings with the all-pervading Consciousness of which the whole creation is a manifestation. Jada-prakriti, that is, material nature, is comprised of earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intelligence, and ego (Bhagavad Gita 7:4). Every living being is a jiva (equivalent to soul in English), a non-material being who has chosen to associate and identify with a material body and to interact with the material world for sense enjoyment. Jiva survives bodily death. Jivas are infinitesimal sparks of Consciousness; the consciousness that a living being experiences is in relation to the being's physical body and depends upon the interaction with the Jada-prakriti. Hindu philosophy treats the self or ego as different from the soul⁵. The ego and the mind are things the soul carries as it were; they are qualities of the soul and are not conscious. Hindu philosophy believes that the soul can detach itself from the mind and ego, and get into the state of pure Consciousness by adequate effort in one's life. Buddhism believes that some non-bodily components of aggregates survive bodily death similarly to the soul in Hinduism. Buddhism preaches that by detachment from ego and its cravings and being aware of the processes of mind and ego, the aggregates vanish and what remains is a higher level of consciousness free of all mental processes and worldly miseries. Nirvana is said to be one such state of a higher level of consciousness that is sometimes described as a state of nothingness or emptiness (cf. *Nirvana*, Wikipedia, 2011).

All philosophers, both eastern and western, agree that the mind is dependent upon its memory for all its functions and that the sense of self and time (past, present, and future) are creations of the mind. Most theistic religions⁶ postulate that God is spirit but not matter, and that He is always conscious; they all preach their followers to surrender their selves to God (whom we have not seen!). It is a way of eliminating the role of self in performing various actions. However, Western religions do not explicitly point out that the self is not conscious by itself. Western philosophies do not explicitly state that the self is not the source of consciousness because they do not mention the possibility of an experience where there is no awareness of self. One Western philosopher who comes closest to the idea that reality not known to the mind may exist is Kant (1781/2003). He viewed the mind as being limited by its own abilities because it constructs our experience along certain lines (space, time, causality, self, etc.). Thus, thinking and experiencing give no access to things as they really are. No matter how sharp our thinking is, we cannot escape the inherent constraints of our minds. He also stated that God and souls are a matter of faith and unknowable by ordinary means.

Jiddu Krishnamurti, a twentieth century philosopher, discussed concepts of self, memory, and awareness-without-the-self extensively. Although he claimed that he did not believe in any religion, his philosophy has similarities to Buddhist philosophy. Krishnamurti (1949) associated the self with memory: "It is the memory of yesterday – of possessions, of jealousies, of anger, of contradiction, of ambition, of what one ought or ought not to be – it is all these things that make up the I; and the I is not different from memory ... memory is the self". Here is another excerpt

⁵ The word "Atman" in Sanskrit is translated as self and very often misinterpreted to be the same as ego, particularly in the West. Ego, which is synonymous with "the self" in this article, is equivalent to "Ahamkara" in Sanskrit. Atman should be translated as soul and is different from ego or if Atman is translated as self then self should be interpreted as being different from ego. Atman is usually masked by ego but can get rid of it. According to Hinduism Atman is part of reality whereas ego or self is an illusion.

⁶ Buddhism never mentions God.

from Krishnamurti's (1953) work: "Mind is memory, at whatever level, by whatever name you call it; mind is the product of the past, it is founded on the past, which is memory, a conditioned state. Now with that memory we meet life, we meet a new challenge. The challenge is always new and our response is always old, because it is the outcome of the past. So experiencing without memory is one state and experiencing with memory is another."

Personal Identity and the Self

Can one distinguish oneself from others without being aware of doing so?

We need and use communications in the world that we live in. Communication, whether verbal or otherwise, involves at least two distinct entities, living or non-living, and therefore the act of communication depends upon the participating entities' ability to distinguish themselves from one another. The essence of "I" is to consciously distinguish oneself from everything else in the universe. Here, the word "consciously" is important because, otherwise, a computer also distinguishes itself from everything else in the universe. That is why we are able to develop and use computer communications. If the programmer gives the name "I" to a robot, it will thereafter say "I know this", "I did this", and so on. But it does not have what we call self-awareness or any awareness in fact. So how does a computer or a robot distinguish itself from the rest of the world without being aware of anything? It is like this: The computer has a *memory*. The computer pretends to be aware of an object when a description of the object in some computer language is entered into its memory. Nowadays, many of us use personal computers and we are very much used to expressions like "the computer knows this", "it understands that", "it thinks", etc. In fact, we can precisely define what it means for a computer "to know" or "to be aware" of an object. Such phrases simply mean that the computer has a description of that object in its database. Once an object's description is entered into this memory, thereafter the computer can perform any number of operations using that description. It can compare the object with other objects also "known" to it in the same way. It can add, subtract, compute functions of it, draw a picture of it, and so on. The computer can do almost anything that a person can do with that object and behave as though it knows and remembers the object without actually being aware of anything! Whether conscious or not, if one may say so, a memory can perceive an object in the following sense; a memory's perception of an object is the object's description that is stored in it. So, given any object material or mental, the computer either already "knows" it or does not "know" it according to the above definition. The computer's knowledge divides the world into two parts – one which is *known* to it and the other not *known* to it. The computer establishes its identity (as the producer of a unique division of the universe) by the very existence of its memory as a common point of reference to all objects whose descriptions it contains.

Now, the above definition of awareness applies to a human brain as well. Neuroscience tells us that a human being (or some other living being) is aware of an object, which may be material or mental, only when a physical representation (neural correlate) of that object exists in his/her brain's memory (non-local or local or whatever the nature of the memory's structure). Hence awareness requires creation of a record in a certain memory and therefore it is an outcome of a certain process. However, unlike the computer, we have this experience of being aware of objects, at least when awake. Therefore in the case of the brain, an experience associated with the neural record must also be created whenever the latter is created. Thus awareness of an

object or event (physical or mental) is the outcome of a process, a process that creates in a certain memory an experience that describes the object. So there must be a capability that enables the brain to produce awareness of whatever object is introduced to it⁷. Living beings have a set of capabilities that together may be called consciousness; one of them is the just described ability to produce awareness of objects (physical or mental). Another is to produce self-awareness. Since the self is an aspect of the memory as a whole, the process of production of self-awareness is much more complicated than the above described process of production of awareness of a content of the memory. Other abilities of consciousness include the ability to pay attention to an object and the ability to make choices consciously (unlike a computer), the so-called free will.

Why did we go through the computer episode? It suggests that a memory is not necessarily conscious and that the sense of self may simply be one of the memory aspects of the mind because indeed, the mind is a memory. The episode also suggests the possibility that consciousness and the sense of individuality may be completely independent of one another. It raises the question, "If one with no consciousness can act with individuality, what about the opposites of both; in other words, can one have consciousness but act without exercising individuality?" The computer episode may also help to understand how self is related to delusion.

Delusion and Self

A computer can recognize patterns in the data presented to it. To do so, the computer needs some heuristics coded and entered into it beforehand. If heuristics are changed, the computer may find a different pattern when the same data are presented to it again. Or, if different heuristics are entered into two computers, then they recognize different patterns even if the same data are presented to them both. Hence the pattern that the computer perceives in the presented data depends upon some contents of its memory. In the case of the computer, the stored description of the pattern is purely material. It has no meaning for the computer. But not so in the case of the human brain, which creates a meaning and interpretation along with a neural representation of any observed object. The brain's description of an object or an event has both physical and mental parts to it. The interpretation part is almost always based on values, experiences and desires all existing in the memory. It is similar to the computer's interpretation of data to recognize patterns using the heuristics in its memory. Thus, how one perceives an event depends upon his/her past, that is, his/her personal memory and his/her self. That is why we say human perception is subjective⁸. Hence subjective perceptions of two people observing the same event can be different and usually they are.

⁷As already said, according to ancient Indian Philosophy, mental records are not conscious by themselves just like their associated neural records. Similarly, the process of creating mental records, that is, *experiences*, is just as mechanical (not conscious) as the process of creating neural records. Their thesis is that the mind may behave as if it is conscious (like the computer!) but is not really conscious. It appears to be conscious because of its source, Consciousness (with big C), which is beyond the physical body, the universe perceived by the senses, and the mind. Consciousness is the source of all creation and the source of everything that we ever know. Matter appears not to be conscious also because of the same source!

⁸ Searle (2000) describes subjectivity as follows: "Subjective conscious states ... are experienced by some 'I' that has the experience, and it is in that sense that they have first-person ontology."

If two people describe the same event in two different ways, which one is the correct description? What is the truth? This confusion arises particularly while judging one's own action or another's. For example, I may make a donation to a charity to claim tax deduction but think that I did so unselfishly and out of pure compassion because I often heard that it is somehow great to be selfless. Or, I might have made the donation selflessly but somebody else who did not may be jealous of me and say that I did it for the sake of tax deduction. They may also rationalize their stinginess by thinking that the particular charity is not properly organized. The self rationalizes because it wants to feel good and the desire to feel good is always there in the mind. Thus, involvement of self in forming a perception leads to delusion.

Can One Be Conscious Without the Sense of "I"? (Is it possible to transcend the self?)

Saints and philosophers have been answering "yes" to this question since a long time. But how does one get to that state, by trial and error? Well, they have also been suggesting various techniques to achieve self-transcendence. Here are some examples:

Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) known to some in the west, used to call the sense of self as the I-thought. He used two words "Self" and "self" in his teachings (Ramana Maharshi 1982). The former (with big S) is what remains when the sense of self ceases to exist; in other words, Self is the state of self-transcendence. He explained (Godman 2002):

You see, the one who eliminates the "not I" cannot eliminate the "I". To say "I am not this" or "I am that" there must be an "I". This "I" is only the ego or the I-thought. After the rising up of this I-thought, all other thoughts arise. The I-thought is therefore the root thought. If the root is pulled out all others are at the same time uprooted. Therefore, seek the root "I", question yourself "Who am I?" Find the source and then all these other ideas will vanish and the pure Self will remain.

He talked about a technique called who-am-I or self-inquiry to remove the I-thought. The technique is to introspectively question oneself from where this thought is coming; he said that the thought of self disappears if one looks deeply inside for it (Ramana Maharshi 2007):

For all thoughts the source is the I-thought. The mind will merge only by Self-enquiry "Who am I?" The thought "Who am I?" will destroy all other thoughts and finally kill itself also. If other thoughts arise, without trying to complete them, one must enquire to whom this thought arose. What does it matter how many thoughts arise? As each thought arises one must be watchful and ask to whom this thought is occurring. The answer will be "to me". If you enquire "Who am I?" the mind will return to its source (or where it issued from). The thought which arose will also submerge. As you practice like this more and more, the power of the mind to remain as its source is increased.

Self (with big S) is the same as Consciousness or pure consciousness free of the mind⁹.

⁹ Unlike the self that distinguishes itself from the rest of the creation, Self identifies itself with everything in the creation. In the experience of Self, there is nothing different from the Self. Some (Vivekananda and Krishnamurti among others) have reported an experience in which everything they see, hear, touch, eat, drink, and so on, as being

Krishnamurti's talks and writings are all about being conscious, aware or observant without any involvement of self. "Only when the activity of the self, of memory, ceases is there a wholly different Consciousness, about which any speculation is a hindrance" (Krishnamurti 1946). Furthermore: "The memory of technical things is essential; but the psychological memory that maintains the self, the 'me' and the 'mine', that gives identification and self-continuance, is wholly detrimental to life and to reality. When one sees the truth of that, the false drops away; therefore there is no psychological retention of yesterday's experience" (Krishnamurti 1953).

As already said, most religions preach surrendering to God. It is a way of transcending the self.

Can One Be Conscious Without the Sense of "I" for a Few Moments?

Obviously, it is not easy to practice Ramana Maharshi's technique of self-inquiry or to stop the mind from thinking as Krishnamurti suggests and be conscious all the time without the sense of "I". Nor it is easy to surrender oneself to God because we do not see Him nor hear Him and therefore do not know what if any, He is telling us to do in a situation. Usually, those who attend places of worship (of any religion) and read their scriptures regularly think of themselves as sincere practitioners of their religion and therefore think that they have surrendered themselves to God. But such actions do not necessarily imply that the self is surrendered; they do involve the self if the purpose of performing them is to derive the satisfaction of being a religious person. So, let us ask a slightly modified version of the question of the previous section as follows: Can one be conscious without the "I" at least for a moment? Since we saw in an earlier section that a property of the self is to distinguish itself from others, let us modify the second question further as: *Can one exist in a conscious state even for a moment, without feeling separate from everything else in the universe?* Let us simplify it further: *Can one identify with (as opposed to distinguish from) one other or a few other beings, for a moment or longer, although not with the whole world?*

Identification Versus Separation

This last question seems to be not as difficult to try to find an answer as the previous ones are. We all heard of the fairly common expression "to put oneself in somebody else's shoes". For example, sometimes, when a friend is in financial troubles, we may sympathize and try to help. Other times, we do not feel the same sympathy and may just pass a judgment like "he should not have spent beyond his means" or some other remark. Compassion and sympathy indicate that we have identified with the other person and felt his/her anguish and wish that the problem would go away just like he/she does: we have put our feet in the other person's shoes. When we are not compassionate or sympathetic, we have separated ourselves from the other person; their problem is not ours. Usually we identify ourselves with our immediate families; we are happy when they are all happy, we are sad when any of them is not doing well. We say that a mother's love for her children is selfless because she does things for them not minding her own comfort. When we love another person or an animal, a pet for example, we identify ourselves with that person or animal. So, we do have some selfless, not necessarily rare, moments in our lives.

the same as themselves.

(In section headings the self written with big S is not to be confused with this *Self*.)

Most probably, every reader of this article must have given donation to one or more charities sometime or other, and I did too. I cooked food and served it in homeless shelters and gave money to charities collecting money for food for the poor and orphans purely out of sympathy towards the unfortunate ones but not with the purpose of claiming a tax deduction on my income tax returns. The source of those actions is selflessness. But its scope is very limited in terms of both time and effort. Did it have an effect on my worldview? Yes, in the following way: The effect occurred soon after identifying my self with the unfortunate; it is to feel compassionate towards them. My view of the homeless changed at least to the extent that, until then, I was not thinking about their problems and anxieties, but the act of identification made me do a little something about it. How long I continue to contribute to charitable work depends upon how long the effect lasts. Interestingly, the same action of charity may be done with or without involvement of self. If I make a donation to make a name for myself or for tax deduction purposes, such a donation is initiated by my self because it seeks some benefit for itself from the results of the action; the motive for the action is not selfless but is instead selfish. An action of charity is selfless only if I do it completely for the sake of the unfortunate. Hence the actual physical action can be the same whether it is initiated selflessly or by the self. Only an unbiased introspection, that is, one without the involvement of self can reveal the true nature (selfish or selfless) of an action.

All living beings have an instinct for survival that makes us compete for resources. We kill other life to satisfy our hunger; we cannot help it. That is the way life is: "Number one comes first!" However, incidents like the following one reported on the web do occur sometimes. It may be true or not, but it is possible that the incident happened: Amar Ali was swimming near the Konodas Bridge in Gilgit when the tides swept him away into the roaring Hanisara (local name of River Gilgit). Israr, a fifteen-year old teenager, jumped into the river upon seeing Amar drowning. To the surprise and delight of hundreds of onlookers, Israr fought against the wild currents and was able to save the life of Amar. In this story, clearly the teenager overcame his sense of self and identified himself with the drowning person. He was not thinking as much about his own life as he was about the drowning person's life. He felt the same urgency to get out of the drowning situation as the drowning person. That is why he jumped into the river. This is an example of risking one's own life out of compassion. On the other hand, suicide bombers do more than risk their lives; they give up their lives not out of compassion but out of revenge towards a community or for a political purpose. This act is not initiated completely without self-interest because the purpose of the act is either to derive the satisfaction of harming the other community and/or to obtain financial benefit for the family. These purposes are given a higher priority in their brains/minds over their own survival. That is why a lot of preplanning happened prior to the act. The bombers do not identify themselves with their victims; they want their victims dead, which is not what the victims want.

It is as though our self is at the center of an expandable balloon filled with what we may call a sense of identification or sense of self. I-thought is at the center of the balloon and identifies itself with our body and its associated experiences. For most people, the balloon expands to include their family. For some the balloon expands to include friends and for others it may enclose the community they were born into or the country they were born in or living in, and so on. In the mother-child example mentioned above, the mother's balloon has the child inside. Whenever we love somebody without expecting anything in return for ourselves, our sense of self extends to include the other being. In a moment of love with no expectation for any returns, we are one with

whom we love; the sense of distinction, duality, separation, and all that the self or I-thought stands for disappear; hence it is a self-transcending experience. However, it is self-transcending in a limited way if the *love* is only for the person/s being loved but not for others. For example, if a mother loves her own children but is jealous of other children, her transcendence of self is limited. In the story of the last paragraph, when the teenager jumped into the river, nothing else in the world other than the drowning person occupied his mind, so he is not aware of his self at that moment. Afterwards, when the whole rescuing operation is over, Israr must have felt happy and even proud of himself when onlookers praised him; feeling proud in such an occasion is not bad but it simply indicates the return of the "I".

On the other hand, people like Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi are said not to have had self-interest ever in their whole lives; whatever they did was for the well being of others and without discrimination of any kind. This means that means their balloon of identification covers everybody and everything and all the time. They lived in the self-transcendent mode throughout their lives. In the Gita the Lord Krishna said: "That Yogi is the best of all Yogis who looks upon everyone as equal to himself [or herself] and considers happiness and unhappiness of others as his own" (Bhagavad Gita 6:32, Dhyana-yoga). The Bible says the same thing "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:39). Here, the first scripture is describing how a person in the state of self-transcendence would behave towards others and the second one is commanding us to transcend self in our treatment of others.

Attention and self

We forget our "I" when we are listening to somebody or something seriously. We have heard the phrase, *the art of listening*, and know how useful and powerful listening is. Listening involves paying attention to what is being heard. One can learn something only when one pays attention to what is being said, or heard, or read. The longer we can keep our attention focused, the better we learn. At the moment of complete attention, only the object of attention occupies the mind, there is no I-thought at that moment. Attention span varies from person to person. Vivekananda's memory was very sharp (Prosad 1997); at the age of only six, he could recite a whole book of Sanskrit verses. If he heard anything once he remembered it throughout his life. Once he read a book he could recall word by word of that book any time and any place. This was because whatever he did he paid his full attention to it. Usually for most people, the attention span is fairly short because mind wanders. For example, when we are studying for an examination and trying to concentrate, other thoughts keep on creeping in. Still, whenever we have learned a fact or a mathematical theorem for example, we must have paid attention to it while reading it or listening to somebody who said it; the self steps aside during moments of such attention.

Of course, the memory is present during the act of observation even while paying attention, because what is learnt is recorded immediately in the brain. However, such recording of facts does not depend upon any contents already existing in the memory; the recording is similar to a person's writing the observed facts on a clean paper directly; the paper has no influence on what is being written on it. Recording of what is attentively observed is unlike a computer's recognition of patterns, described in the earlier section on delusion, where the pattern perceived by the computer depended upon the heuristics which were already contents of the memory;

here, the already existing contents influence what is being written at present. Thus one may say that a perception is what is recorded in the memory when the self participates in the act of recording whereas factual knowledge is what is directly recorded by consciousness without the participation of self¹⁰. Krishnamurti (1953) seems to agree with this notion of two kinds of memory: factual and perceptual; he calls the latter psychological memory.

Here is an experience of mine in which I overcame stage fear by paying attention to what I presented rather than to my anticipated perception of me by the audience. My heart used to start pounding just before I proceeded to the platform. My supervisor, who observed me and understood my problem, suggested to me to try to speak slower. I followed his advice. To try to speak slower than I did before, I had to pay attention to each word I was saying and it worked! Anxiety and fear were out of my mind! I tried to speak slowly during only one or two presentations but stage fear is gone forever. While I listened to my own words, those words alone occupied my mind and the thought of how the audience will receive my presentation was not in the domain of my awareness. After a few attempts, my mind must have gotten used to directing my brain to speak slowly and pay full attention to what I was saying. Of course, while making a presentation, it is good to be sensitive to whether the audience is receiving clearly what one intends to convey. In that case, attention is paid to the audience's response in the spirit of service but not in the spirit of what is in it for the presenter, success or failure. Hence one may look for the audience's response either selfishly or selflessly. One only knows how it is done but cannot prove it to somebody else that it is done selflessly.

Professors, particularly mathematicians and physicists, are known to be absent-minded. A well-known story about Newton goes like this: Newton once invited a friend for dinner. The friend arrived as scheduled to dine with him. Finding him deeply absorbed in working out a mathematical problem, the friend sat down to wait. Sometime afterwards, someone brought dinner from the kitchen but only for one, and put it on the table because Newton had forgotten about inviting the friend. When Newton continued to work at his desk, the friend, in order not to disturb him, ate Newton's meal. A little later, Newton, having finished his work, finally looked up and was surprised by both the presence of his friend and the empty dinner plate. Looking at the empty plate he said, "If it weren't for the proof before my eyes, I could have thought that I had not yet eaten." The point of the story is that all of Newton's attention was focused on the mathematical problem and everything happening around him escaped his notice. In the state of absorption, Newton was thinking only about the problem and its solution; there is no thought of even "I" in that state. Full attention to an object whether external or mental, pushes out all other thoughts from the domain of the mind's awareness. Solving a mathematical problem consists of a

¹⁰ The computer's memory has two components: one is a database, which is a set of static records and is the passive component; the other is software, which is a set of instructions and the active component. When turned on, the software becomes dynamic and creates new records in the database using input data. Heuristics are software entities that the computer operator can turn on or off; s/he can enter the pattern directly into the database instead of seeking assistance from the software if s/he so chooses. (Of course, a computer user does not want to do so under ordinary circumstances.) On the other hand, a paper, although it is a memory device, has no software, the active component; the paper is similar to the computer's database. The brain/mind is more like a computer than a paper in that the brain/mind's memory has both passive and active components; the self is an active aspect of the memory because it is associated with the entire memory. But it seems that it is possible for consciousness to create records in the brain's memory without involving the self just like a computer user can enter and save data in the database without invoking the software.

sequence of thoughts to which the mind pays attention one after another while solving the problem. During that time, if one can concentrate, no other thought draws mind's attention to it, nor does any sensory input from the external world draw mind's attention. Attention to an object (physical or mental) is required to recognize or be aware of that object.

One does not have to be a Newton to be so absorbed in what one does. When I was working on my thesis for my mathematics degree, I used to be absentminded the same way. When I was thinking about solution to a mathematical problem, I would not know if a visitor came even if they passed by me. I would not say hello to a friend even though I was staring at her; my eyes were looking at her but not I. Knowing me well, friends did not feel offended. They used to wake me up, so to speak, from my state of absorption and then I would respond.

There seems to be an interesting effect on one's mind itself of such attentive thinking, particularly when the solution to the problem occurs to the mind later but not while thinking about it. The object of thinking need not be a mathematical problem; it could be an idea in an essay or in a piece of poetry yet to be written or completed. We hear of people having a eureka-like experience sometime later, a few hours or few days later after having stopped thinking about it. The solution to the problem or what to write in the poem or essay strikes the mind suddenly like lightning from the blue, when one is not thinking about it. I had that experience many times. Since there is no related effort when the idea creeps into the mind (I might be thinking about something unrelated), awareness of self seems to be interrupted momentarily. The experience certainly has an element of surprise in it if not mystery. I do not know if psychologists and neuroscientists have an explanation of why the idea reveals itself so suddenly.

Sense of Agency and self

Often, religious people of any faith have something to say about how creative ideas occur to our minds. I have a Christian friend who is a firm believer. If I tell her that I am working on writing an article she would say, "Surrender yourself to the Lord. He will show you what to write! A Hindu poet of the fifteenth century and well known for his translation of the Bhagavatam, a book of stories of Lord Vishnu, writes in the preface that "He is the author and I write what He wants me to" (Bammera Potana 2004). Both statements imply that a writer needs to or does set aside the sense of self while doing creative work. They imply that creative inspiration occurs when the self retires from the scene of action¹¹. As said before, surrendering oneself to God is a way of letting go of the self. In fact, one of the main teachings of the *Gita* is that the right way to do any work is to do it without the sense of agency, that is, without feeling something like "This task cannot be, or would not have been accomplished without my undertaking it". Again, surrendering oneself to God is not at all easy because one does not know what God wants one to do. One may do what one's self wants, or what one thinks is the best thing to do under the given circumstances but strongly believe that he/she has acted according to God's will¹². Such belief is usually a

¹¹ In the context of discussing the relation between time and experience, Nixon (2010) expresses a similar idea: "It may be possible to somewhat escape the self-constructed prison of time-past through creative inspiration or spontaneous action in a crisis situation." We have already seen in an earlier section, in the story of the teenager's rescue of the person drowning in the river, how he overcame self in a crisis situation.

¹² Scriptures (of any religion in general), are interpreted differently by different people making it difficult to understand the religion and much more difficult to practice it. Hypocritical but passionate practice of different

delusion created by the self.

In the case of my overcoming-stage-fear experience, let us look into what was causing the anxiety when it did. One of the causes is the need to do well and thereby avoid failure. What is success? Approval of what I say by the audience and failure is disapproval by them. The anxiety arises because of forgetting that one cannot control others' reactions or judgments and therefore trying to find a way to please the audience but not knowing how to do it. In other words, anxiety arises because of thinking that I am responsible not only for how I perform, but also for their reaction. When I pay full attention to what I say, but not to *me*, this sense of agency disappeared. Actually, if I paid full attention to the topic of my presentation when I prepared it, the sense of self was not present even during the preparation as we saw earlier.

Here are two of my experiences in one of which I feel that I am the doer, and in the other, I simply implement somebody else's instructions. I taught mathematics in a university in India. As part of my job, I graded students' answer sheets after exams. Answers in the final exam were evaluated by teachers within the university as well as by external examiners and averages of internal and external grades were used to decide pass or fail and rank. Internal evaluators were, in general, generous because they wanted to compensate for any low grades from external evaluations that are usually rigorous. They wanted more students to score high grades and the department to have a good reputation. Students were also pleased to have secured good grades, so everybody was happy. Somehow, students' grades from my evaluation were usually much lower than those from other teachers and close to those from external evaluators. As a result, the faculty members were not thrilled to see my grades. On my part, I was also happy if students got good grades. I did not intend to be mean to them. I could not even show partiality because students were not supposed to write their names on answer sheets. In mathematics, an answer is either correct or incorrect; usually there is no in-between. If I gave a full grade for an incorrect answer, I would be unfair to ones who wrote the correct answer; moreover, it misleads the one who wrote the wrong answer. I did not know how to change my evaluation scale to produce better results, but I was unhappy that I could not improve their grades. A few years later, I was a teaching assistant in a computer science department and used to help my professor with the grading work. He would give me a paper with instructions showing what grades to assign to different answers. I followed them and had complete peace of mind! Whatever grades students secured did not bother me as they did before. I was not responsible for what they got.

Attachment to Results of Action and self

When I was a student in computer science, my advisor had his first baby. At that time, I had a three year old child. In my house, we had an electric swing that I had bought for the child when he was born, but was not being used because he outgrew it. I thought it could be useful to my advisor and his wife to put their baby to sleep, so I asked my husband to take it out and check

religions by different communities without proper understanding of their religion has been the cause of several wars throughout history. It is the abusive practice of religions that has created the generation of today's suicide bombers. In any case, hurting someone is not a selfless action unless it is done for the sake of well-being of that someone or others, as in the well-known examples of a doctor performing surgery on a patient or a judge sentencing of a serial killer to death. Any action based in hatred, jealousy, vengeance, etc. implies the perpetrator's separating himself/herself from the victim but not identification with the victim because the victim does not want to be hurt.

whether it is still working. Two or three days later, I asked him whether he checked the swing; he said he did and that the swing was working, so I offered the swing to my advisor and he accepted the offer. He invited me and my husband to come over to his place and bring the swing. One evening we went to his place and, after some conversation, my husband opened the box, took the swing out and set it up. There it was: the swing looked fine but when the button was pressed it would not swing! I was totally embarrassed. Of course, our hosts did not complain at all, and after spending some more time there, we came home. But my mind was not at peace. I went on thinking, "I should have checked the swing myself," or "Should I buy a new one and give it to them?" or "Why did I offer it in the first place?" and so on. I was thinking about the incident so constantly that I could not concentrate on the subject matter when I was in the class. A few days later, following the suggestion of a friend, I went to talk to the university psychologist about this state of mine. She praised me for being so concerned about keeping a promise, said that I need not worry because the swing could still work by pushing by hand, and other such words to calm me. One of them was that my advisor and wife were probably pleased anyway and might not think any less of me. When I heard that, the real reason for my unhappiness suddenly dawned on me. I was not worried for the young parents, but I was worried for myself; I was worried that I might have lost my advisor's good impressions of me. I was worried that he might have thought of me as a disorganized person. Why I did not give them a new swing was also for the same reason: I was worried that if I did so, then he might think that I was overdoing things to win his favors because I already gave a gift to the baby. The realization put an end to my unhappiness. At the moment of realization, the introspection was not by my self; it was as though somebody else with no bias whatsoever looked at the contents of my mind and showed me what the real reason for unhappiness was. The realization also detached me from all consequences of what took place. Even if I believed what the psychologist said (that my advisor did not mind what happened), I would have probably overcome my unhappiness but not my self, and I would not have found the cause of unhappiness.

A similar incident happened another time. Knowing that I was about to visit India, an old man who was a friend of my father asked me to bring him a radio. So I bought one that works on both 110 and 220 volts DC. The storekeeper tested it in front of me here in the U.S. and then gave it to me. I took it to India and gave the unopened box to my father's friend when he came to visit us. He opened it and put the radio's power plug into the power outlet before I could ask him to check what the DC setting was. The radio blew up at once, probably because the shopkeeper left the switch setting on 110 volts. We were all disappointed. Next day, I bought a new radio and gave it to him and we were all happy. This time there was no dilemma whether to buy another one or not because I was not worried about what he would think of me if I did or did not. I was free to buy or not to buy. I was not controlled by the anticipated results of the action. I bought a new radio anyway because I identified myself with him. I was one with him all along: when I first bought the radio, he wanted it, so I wanted it; when it exploded, he was disappointed and I was disappointed; when I bought it the second time, both of us were happy again.

It is interesting how the self creates big delusion in this context. The first experience described above shows that my anticipation of the results of buying a new swing controls the self's present action. The other experience shows that lack of any expectation as a result of the action allows freedom to act, how to act or not to act. However, the self always thinks that it is the initiator, doer, and controller of all actions, whereas it is actually being controlled by the past or

anticipated responses of its own actions from other

Conclusion

The principles that I have used in my analysis of an experience are as follows: The self is an aspect of the mind which, as defined in the beginning of the article, is a memory. When a perception of the self's encounter with the world is created, the perception is dependent upon the contents of the memory and therefore may be a distorted view of reality. On the other hand, withdrawal of self from the act of observation brings awareness of reality. The same is true when one tries to evaluate or judge one's own thoughts although, in this case, the objects of observation are internal to the mind/brain. After forming a perception, the self reacts. When somebody praises me I feel good; when somebody insults me I feel offended. All emotions such as joy, sorrow, pleasure, and pain are reactions to what the self receives from the outside world; they depend upon whether what is received is what the self wanted or not. Emotions such as anxiety and fear are responses to anticipation of future events, but the anticipation (an image of the future event) is already in the memory. Therefore, reactions depend upon the memory contents just like perceptions do. When the self initiates an action, it does so based on expectations, perceptions, and reactions. On the other hand, if I do not mind what another person says about me, then my ego is not acting up. If so, what others say or think will not affect my actions. Hence the self is not involved in those actions that are not based on perceptions, prejudices or anticipated results of those actions.

My observation is that almost always self is involved in our thinking, actions, and perceptions of the world. As Nixon (2010) says: "Only rarely can we escape the context of self through which our life experience is filtered..." However, in the lives of ordinary people who have basic human values but who may or may not practice meditation, yoga, or other techniques of mind control, the self still steps aside momentarily now and then. The frequency of occurrence of such moments may vary from person to person. Introspection and analysis of one's own experiences certainly helps understand the nature of the mind and may help to increase the frequency and duration of the self-transcendent state. As we saw above, a few moments of absence of self in my experience have nothing mysterious about them. Such moments may bring memories of similar moments to the mind of the reader.

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Article

Self-Transcendence as a Developmental Process in Consciousness

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Abstract

After an introduction describing certain difficulties in relating the nature of self-transcending experiences, I give a narrative description of three successive episodes in which a certain relationship and development over time can be discerned. This is followed by a discussion of the impact they have had over the course of my lifetime together with observations on how they have affected my outlook. These experiences have led me to the view that it is more likely that it is consciousness generating the illusion of a material reality than a material reality generating consciousness. I consider self-transcendence to be understood as a stage in the development of the consciousness of each human being, and ultimately in the development of humanity as a whole.

Keywords: consciousness, self-transcendence, developmental process.

Introduction

Before making any attempt to describe the self-transcending experiences I have had to those who may not have had one, I would like to advise the reader that over the years I have come to realise that I can never be satisfied with any efforts I make in this direction, because there is a fundamental difficulty that frustrates any such attempt. This difficulty is rooted in the nature of the experience and the means by which we are forced to communicate with one another either orally or by the written word.

The experiences I am going to attempt to relate have the quality of involving many aspects of conscious awareness almost simultaneously. There is the direct experience itself that a person is aware of from their surrounding environment. Mostly these stimuli are visual because for most of us vision is our primary sense. So, the experiencer often then focuses any attempt to describe what is occurring in visual terms even though these aspects are underlain and mixed with emotional and sensory impressions.

These other impressions that impinge on consciousness in the moment of occurrence involving emotions, sensations and feelings along with impressions concerning time and space all engender and contribute to the use of words like *amazement*, *wonderment*, *joy*, *happiness* and *peace* when attempting to describe the experience. There are also the physical sensations that occur that are best described by words like *exhilaration* and *elation*.

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Elements of thought are also involved but perhaps not the sort of thinking that is usually experienced. There seems to be an element of timelessness to this thought that gives it a quality of being constant – almost best described as an awareness – and this awareness can also bring a sort of knowledge that is unformed and best described by the word *knowing*. There is also a sense of conjoining or oneness with all that is experienced. All or some of these elements can be present in an experience of transcendence, depending, possibly on the situation or person. This experience of oneness was something that was to be confirmed by my readings in later years in such books as *The Teachings of the Mystics* (1960) by Walter T. Stace.

So, there may be different aspects of the experience occurring, but they seem to be encapsulated in a *whole* frequently seeming to occur almost in an instant. I suspect that when you read many accounts of such experiences by those who have had them this is one of the reasons they often attempt to describe a state of immanence coupled with a loss of the sense of self – because that sense of self becomes immersed into a whole and almost lost.

All this I believe contributes to the sensation of an overwhelming sense of exploding energy that comes with such an experience. If you consider what it might be like to have a year's experiences explode into your mind in one instant then this might give you some inkling of the overwhelming sense that such experiences often engender: then consider that sometimes they might be more like a lifetime's experience occurring in one instant. Therefore, if you wish to know what you might be experiencing in such an instant, you should properly consider that it will include not only thoughts and memories but also feelings, sensations, colour, a vividness of light and emotion all experienced together in a timeless moment.

All these elements are enhanced and have an intensity that stands in contrast to the everyday experience of consciousness. It seems as if all the elements of your senses are superior. But it is also as if all these elements of your mind that you might otherwise consider separately occur at once, to an extent that time and space seem to vanish. It is this aspect of transcendence that would seem to be most difficult to convey when one attempts to give a sense of the actual experience itself.

So, with this in mind, it is perhaps crucial for a reader to try and give some thought to all this when trying to assimilate what others and I will try to relate about any experience of transcendence. Because it is in the nature of the way we communicate both orally and in the written word that we are forced to relate things separately in a linear fashion. In fact it is also true that our thinking also occurs mostly in a linear fashion. This is fundamentally at odds with the experience of self-transcendence.

In describing the following experiences not only am I constrained to relating them in a linear fashion element by element to the reader but also the reader is forced to assimilate them in a linear fashion. Given that what is being transmitted

is an experience that occurs as complete, it needs to be borne in mind that this is why the full impact of such an experience probably cannot be fully transmitted. The best that can be done is to ask the reader as I am doing here to consider using their imagination to combine what is described.

With this in mind, I wish to contribute three self-transcending experiences that have occurred in my life for consideration and to relate them in chronological order, because I believe it shows first that some individuals may be more prone to such experiences, for whatever reason, but also that such experiences contribute to the development of changes in an individual's consciousness and the paths they are likely to follow through life.

I would like to point out that there seems to be some sort of progression in that the first experience seems more seminal in some ways. Being the first it may also be considered as the start of a process. The second seems more rational and focussed in intellectual thinking, affecting my perception of things. The third and final seems in many ways to be a culmination of those that went before more, profound in its implications and affecting the whole course of my life since it occurred.

First Self-Transcendence: An Awakening.

As a child somewhere between the ages of three and four I was playing on a warm spring day in the back garden. At the bottom of that garden was what to me seemed a secret place because it led to a laneway that must have been about two metres below the back retaining wall of the garden. A tangle of undergrowth grew there on top of the wall. Above it all I recall trees with catkins drifting in the breeze against a blue spring sky. The lane beyond was forbidden to me but to the right of the garden were steps cut down into the slope that led directly to the forbidden laneway. I descended these steps to take a peek at the world beyond in the lane. The walls of the trench into which the steps were cut were lined with decaying red bricks when...

Suddenly all seemed soft and quiet on the steps. Shafts of golden sunlight played through the tree branches and catkins above and danced spotlights of golden light over the damp red bricks which were covered in mosses. Suddenly, a sense of magic drew me to look closely at the mosses that immediately shone with a brilliant mixture of viridian and emerald greens shocked against the deep red browns of the crumbling, damp, bricks. The flickering sunlight only seemed to enhance the intensity of the colours. I remember reaching and touching the softness of the moss lightly with my fingers and there was a sense of being immersed and one with dank earthy smells and the wonderful softness of the mosses that seemingly caressed my fingertips. But mostly it engendered a sense of wonder at the colours of nature all warm and sheltered from the cool breeze above. It seemed like timeless hours passed in that trench.

Second Self-Transcendence: A Change of Direction

Many years later I was in my final year of school at the age of fifteen. Although I was told that without a university degree—and working class people did not get

university degrees—I could not be a scientist, I hoped to be, at least, a lab technician doing something scientific. My family warned me it did not pay well and the only other option was draughtsman, which seemed boring. I had transformed into a serious young man interested in studying anything related to science, which I felt would save the world. My experiences at a Catholic boarding school had turned me into a convinced atheist.

I was on my way from the school library to the science labs to do some more experiments in my free period. The science labs were newer buildings set apart from the old Victorian red brick main school. They were reached by crossing a tarmacked playground passing through a gateway in an old wall and entering a covered walkway.

A long time ago that playground must have looked very different because against the brick wall were flower borders and the occasional aged tree. The flower borders had long been trampled and stamped into a hard earth pavement. Ever since I had been at the school they had been like that, sterile flattened earth hardly distinguishable from the tarmac.

As I walked across the playground something caught my eye. Intensely vivid against the dull red brick was a small bright orange flower. It was growing hard up against the brick wall, a little sprig of stunted green topped with vivid orange petals. Two things struck me as I walked towards it. One was the impossibility of it having managed to grow there. I supposed it had grown from a long dormant seed. But more amazing was the fact that it had escaped all the stamping boots of hords of children who filled the playground at every break.

It seemed to me that it had beaten all the odds to grow there and it still had to produce seed. I must have paused a moment in a sense of wonder. The flower was a Californian Poppy. I knew it had originated on another continent, germinated against all the odds and was doing just what it was supposed to do in having produced this vivid orange flower.

Suddenly I was filled with a sense of its vulnerability and its place within the greater scheme of things. But more than that it was the intensity of the orange that held me now. I was transfixed by it, gazing into pure, glistening orange. For moments I seemed lost, submerged in a universe of orange. Wonderment filled me and my mind seemed to be racing through everything I knew and had learnt about that flower. What was the orange I saw? All that science had taught me, so far, seemed to be in my head in seconds.

It was composed of atoms, it had a genetic structure held in a seed that when conditions were right germinated, unfolding complex molecules that interacted with soil, air, light and water to create leaves, stems and petals. The petals were there to attract insects to pollinate the flower. I knew all the parts of the plant and how they functioned. I knew from the atomic level up how each part of the plant functioned. I knew its chemistry, its structure, its biology—but that orange?

I knew that cells were arranged to absorb certain wavelengths. The light came from the sun but it was waves or particles, not orange. Some wavelengths were absorbed and orange wavelengths were reflected. They entered the iris of my eye and stimulated retinal cells that passed electrical signals down my optic nerves that stimulated more cells in my brain. There was some sort of electro-chemical dance that then took place amongst my cells as they registered the presence of orange wavelengths. But this was not orange. In a shattering realisation, I grasped that nothing that I had learnt about myself or the plant or the physical nature of the universe could explain what this sense of orange was that I was experiencing in all of its vividness. It had created and stimulated a cascade of emotions of wonderment and all that could be explained away as electrical activity in my brain. But I had realised that the actual subjective experience of orange—nothing explained that—and it seemed to me that nothing could. Science, I suddenly realised, could not provide an answer.

Third Self-Transcendence: An Explosion of Mind

It must have been over a year later. I had a lot of time on my hands. After nearly a year of studying art at school I had finished my exams and left. I only had a few months of grace to decide what I was going to do. I was looking for a job as a junior artist while waiting for the opportunity to go to Art College. I was, though, in a bit of an emotional turmoil because I felt under pressure to choose a career and I did not really know what I wanted to be or if I had made the right choice.

It was 1965; there were intimations the world was going to change away from the staid conventional approach that had governed society throughout my childhood. A new post war generation was coming of age and I was part of that. However, I was shy and conventional and spent most of my time at home reading—vaguely aware that the world was going on outside my home through the radio and television. Pop music was beginning to make an impact and over it all hung the threat of the bomb and annihilation.

With the egotistical passion of youth, there was I, having decided that before I could know what I wanted to be and do, I needed to know everything to be able to make the correct decision. So, with this in mind I was purposefully reading every book I could get my hands on. They were books on a variety of scientific disciplines but mainly focussing on the disciplines that were related to life, anything from genetics and evolution to anthropology and sociology. Day after day was spent in reading and studying until I was reaching a point of mental exhaustion.

It is difficult to convey the intensity of the effort that I was imposing upon myself at this time. However, I suspect it is important to what occurred. With this in mind it is perhaps best to try to convey something of the kind of thinking that was occurring at that time in an attempt to illustrate that state of mind of nearing exhaustion, because I suspect it is relevant.

One day it had dawned upon me that I was attempting the ridiculous because I could not possibly know everything. The only being that could know everything

would be God and I did not believe in a God. Furthermore God was something I had not thought too much about for a long time ever since I was about twelve and had left the Catholic boarding school as an atheist.

I eventually found myself wrestling with thoughts like, "God would be the only being that could know it all, but he did not exist." So, that was an impossible and fruitless avenue to go down. I could not bring myself to start praying to something I did not believe in. Neither did I have any evidence for the existence of God and I could not find any either.

With a sense of deepening despair I kept coming back to this worrying thought that the only thing that could know everything was God. It had occurred to me that if I wanted to know everything what I was really asking for was to be like a God. With these thoughts I had come to realise that if I should ever get to know everything it would follow that I would be the same as God. It was obvious I could not be God. I could also not be anything like God, yet if there were a God he would know the answer that I craved for, but because I believed that there was no God it only increased my sense of despair.

My situation wasn't helped by thoughts like, "If there were a God couldn't he have given me the ability to understand what I craved for?" It seemed unjust to create a creature that could ask the question but never work out the answer. What was the point in making me with a need to know if I could never know? This would be the cruellest of jokes and what kind of a God would do that? But there was no God to play such a joke so it was all pointless speculation.

Here, in a way, I had my answer. I was never going to know everything because only a God would know everything. My ego was beginning, I think, to realise its limitations. I would have to just live life as best I could and perhaps it was not worth living. But against this suicidal direction of thought was the knowledge that if there ever was a hidden purpose to it all then I was meant to live, because I had worked out that all life lived, reproduced, seemingly in a battle against death. If there were some hidden purpose to everything then all life was heading there, unless, of course, it was all a meaningless joke. The situation was impossible. No one knew everything. It was impossible for a human being to know everything.

This realisation had really filled me with a deep sense of almost suicidal despair because of how impossible the task I had set myself was. I knew I was reasonably clever but I was sane enough to know there were many far smarter than I and I did not find that they had satisfactorily answered my problem.

A thought then came into my head, something along the lines of, "If there were a God only he would know what I wanted to know." And then the thought came—almost like a silent prayer—into my head, "If there were a God, he would have to help me," along with the immediate inner reply, "This is not possible because there is no God."

Eventually I reached the point where I was getting tired of the constant reading and thinking. Things weren't improving in my home life. So it was that I began to wonder if I had the brains for it all that I should just give up my quest. But then I knew that if I did that I couldn't be happy, so I had no choice but to keep on studying—I was caught.

I'd focussed more on anthropology and genetics because it seemed the answer might lie somewhere in there. The riddle of what life is about and how human societies and people should be and ought to be organised was becoming a preoccupation. This was heady stuff for a sixteen-year-old and I was on my own in this enterprise, knowing of no one who shared my preoccupation. It was an intensely personal struggle.

Lying on the floor with several opened books and a pile to read my thoughts were continually distracted to the problem of how impossible it was. It was not surprising I did not have the answer. But, would I ever get the answer? It seemed suddenly I would not. The thought came that perhaps I had to just live my life like everyone else seemed to and muddle through and hope for the best. But I knew I would not be happy doing this. I would always be indecisive about causes—never sure which way I should live my life. Again I kept returning to the struggle: how could I get to know it all?

So, with a feeling of total emptiness, despair and mental exhaustion and in the blackest of moods I was considering that I would never be able to know what I desired. I was pondering my options, preparing to live life in ignorance or perhaps not live it at all. I was thinking, "If there were a God he could help me." I rose from the floor where I had been reading and walked over to the window, reflecting, "But there isn't. This is it. I will have to live life with no knowledge, blindly going whichever way fate takes me, and accepting my fate." I looked out of the window at the scene I had looked at so many times before: a tree lined street that curved into the distance with a blue cloud filled summer sky hanging over it all. Then everything went black.

I have no idea how long the moment of blackness lasted. It seemed instantaneous but it could have lasted for hours. I was unable to think and was not aware of anything, so I have no way to judge if it was seconds or minutes or even an hour. I just recall and am aware that for what seemed a moment there was a blank blackness—nothing.

Instantly there was the scene that I had been looking at. The grey silver road snaking off between the trees, the rolling white clouds; only now it was ablaze with an intensity of light that seemed to burn its way into my mind with a radiance that is impossible to describe. Every colour was overwhelmingly intense, like some vast spotlight had been turned on behind the usual scene. But this impression was just that, a seemingly instantaneous change. At the same time I felt myself flowing outwards into it and in the same moment it seemed the scene and the whole universe poured into me.

The effect was a sense of merging into wholeness. I seemed to float in what would normally be in front of my eyes, a part of it all. An incredible sense of joy and peace also filled me. It seemed that suddenly I knew and understood.

I understood, not in the logical thinking, linear way that I normally understood and thought about things. I just knew and it seemed that I, as a part of it all, had the potential to achieve anything. Whatever direction I turned my awareness towards I could perceive it all. It was like being in a room, in which I was aware of all the contents, and my vision had a full three hundred and sixty degree span in a way in which I did not have to think about anymore. It was an instantaneous and complete view. I did not have to turn my head to look at the scene that I knew was just behind me or to the side of me because I was already aware of it. Instantly a different view or perspective of the same completeness existed before me. It was not a room that I was in, though—it was the universe throughout eternity.

When I considered my *self* in this state, it was as if I was just one focal point in the whole. I could perceive the generations before me spiralling down into the past in an unbroken chain of life in which my self was just a minor part. I could perceive all the beings before me who had lived, struggled and died to give life to me. Down past apes, animals, and dinosaurs to the earliest forms of amoebic life into the dark recesses of the material universe. Yet it was all from the perspective that it was part of me. I seemed just a particular point in a vast process.

More incredibly, when I looked up into the sky it seemed I lifted and rushed upwards into the clouds through their mistiness and into the darkness of space. I seemed to be aware for moments of a kind of pausing viewing the stars and then the expansion continued. The earth, moon, sun and planets fell into me as I rushed out towards pinpoint stars. At some point the perspective changed and it seemed the stars were falling back into me creating the opposite effect as if the universe was collapsing into me.

Yet at some point I was able to view it all. An immensity of stars and worlds spiralling up through time but the amazing thing was that it was one vast whole. I could perceive that everything existed as if it was just a clockwork mechanism in that if the tiniest cog moved at one end of the universe at the other end, even into the farthest recesses of time, every other cog/particle moved in unison. I could perceive and understand that even the tiniest occurrence anywhere throughout the farthest reaches of time affected everything else. There was no thing that was separate and I was a part of it and it was part of me, all held in a perfect balance.

There was an extreme sense of harmony, wonder and beauty that filled me at all this and a sense of love and wonder for it and all the things that shared it with me. Not least because I could see that everything had its opposite and was perfectly balanced by it, and things altered and changed but only in conjunction

with a shift in their opposites. Opposites, I perceived, existed on all levels and forms of existence, but their sum total added up in some way to a whole. I felt a sense of relief also because I knew that everything was all right and things were just as they were supposed to be. This was utter perfection.

My attention shifted back to the immediate scene before me. I knew that in some incredible way I was it and it was me and the whole thing was so incredibly beautiful that it seemed almost unbearable. I suddenly knew that the world was mine and I could achieve anything. Here I think I became aware of the first glimmerings of linear thoughts as though a different sort of thinking awareness was gradually encroaching again. It seemed that if I thought about it I could do anything in this universe of mine because it was me and as these thoughts crystallised and began to run from one to another, so the intensity of light seemed to fade, and the universe began to slowly return to normal.

As it did so, I began to realise that my whole body was shaking and trembling as if it had experienced some profound shock. My legs felt weak, like jelly, and my knees buckled. I had to clutch at the windowsill. I turned and walked unsteadily to a chair in the corner of the room and collapsed into it, stunned.

Aftermaths

In the aftermath of this last experience I very much feared for my sanity. Eventually I decided to confide in the one man in my circle whom I knew would at least understand. He was my mother's lover and had been for years. He was, sadly, about to lose out in the course of events. After the sudden death of my maternal grandmother, my mother and he were to struggle with the reality of her pregnancy by another man and what it meant for them.

Yet he was the most educated man I knew. He loved classical music, had his front room equipped as a library and music room with a vast collection of books, records and tapes that lined the walls. He had helped me with my educational struggles coaching me through maths in particular with which I had a lot of difficulty. I knew he was a professed humanist and agnostic. He had been around since my mother had divorced my father when I was five and of all the people I knew I respected him for his humanity and apparent wisdom. For me he was a substitute uncle, the only wise man in my environment.

I went and visited him one evening and with some trepidation related the above events to him saying that I greatly feared that I was going insane. He took it very calmly, listened to me intently and reached up to a book on one of his library shelves. Handing it to me, he said, "I think you may have had one of these." He did not think I was going insane; in fact, he said he envied me the experience. The book, whose title I have long since forgotten, was on mysticism. It opened a different world for me. There was enough in it to convince me that it was indeed a mystical experience that I had experienced and I started on a long path of studying hoping that I could discover exactly what it was all about. For unlike the previous two experiences the third one had totally overwhelmed me and

changed all my previous conceptions of the world as well as myself. Things could never be the same again.

The first experience, well, I had no idea that it was anything other than normal. The second I tended to think of at the time as a powerful eureka moment and it obviously had more intellectual undertones. But this third one was like a powerful revelation, what many would identify as a religious experience. All three share something perhaps indefinable in that they are intimations of another different state of consciousness. Initially, with the first two I was not aware that they might be anything exceptional but when the third one occurred I feared for my sanity. This third experience sent me on a conscious search for an explanation more than anything else because it had shown me a different world to the one I normally existed in.

It took me some time to recognise that what had occurred in the second experience had similar qualities to the other two. I had not recognised it as any kind of mystical or religious experience possibly because I had never come across any mention of such religious experiences even in the period of my religious upbringing. It took me even longer to recognise the significance of the first experience. In fact, it was not until I started to take an interest in the nature of consciousness that I realised its significance. I started to think about it when I considered the problem of when my consciousness had become self-aware. There it was—one of my earliest memories, if not the first one. It had not dimmed in time and I still clearly remember it as if it were yesterday.

All three experiences share that quality of transcendence that is so hard to describe. That quality has something to do with feeling a sense of wonder, immanence, beauty and a loss of the sense of self. The possible exception is, of course, the first, for I can only wonder if my sense of being an individual self really began at that point. I only have a problem in that I cannot say that I did not have a sense of self before that point. I only recall that at that point I experienced a sense of oneness and at the same time a sense of being different from the moss. The oneness contrasted with the sense of being different. I suspect that in a childlike innocence I may not have noticed that difference before, whereas now I walk about like most people, in opposition to the world I exist in, largely defining myself by doing so. It may be that at one time I did not. I cannot say for sure that I approached the situation from the position of knowing the moss was not part of me, because I cannot recollect having such thoughts at that age. I, like most people, was generally unaware of being me. It would seem to be true, though, that it was at this point that I became aware through a sense of wonder that this moss, although an extension of me and my world, was something to wonder at. It was as if it was the first time that I had seen that heavenly viridian green and all its shimmering shades. So, it may be that the first experience differed from the others in this respect. Once the separate individual sense of self is formed, it is the immersion into oneness that assumes significance. Often when I have read accounts of transcendence it is this experience that is given some prominence, quite naturally so, from the stance of a fully formed adult. But this early experience for me makes me question this element's importance. There is

something else about transcendence that has significance, something more indefinable that involves these aspects but is neither. What links all three is that indefinable mystery, the disturbance of the balance between the self and the merging with the greater world, along with the feelings of beauty, wonderment and exhilaration that comes with it all.

Changing

There is no doubt that these experiences have changed me. The first gave me a tantalising glimpse of something else, another quality of and within, the apparently normal world around me. It led me to be fascinated initially with nature and the qualities of light and colour. It gave to my world a sense of sensuality in all things. It is the first time that I can recall being drawn to the experiences of the natural world that has always since seemed to draw out of me a sense and feeling for the beauty, awe and wonderment of it all.

I feel that the value of this experience was that without it I would have found it harder to develop an appreciation of these things that later evolved into a love of art, gardening, nature, animals, people and so much else that now seems so intrinsic to me and might be associated with the word spiritual. Of course I recognise now that there are others who feel and have felt the same things. They have left their mark upon societies and in some ways ease the paths of others searching for their truths.

I have never had personal contact with a guru of any kind but a person who probably influenced me a lot through his books and seemed in many ways a kindred spirit would have been Alan Watts. His book, *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are* (1966/89), resounded perfectly with me and his other writings helped me to explore paths he had followed.

Alan Watts is known to have used drugs to assist him to explore these realms, but I recognised early on the wisdom in some Buddhist warnings against their use, in particular a small booklet by Lama Anagarika Govinda entitled *Drugs or Meditation* (1971/73), especially the idea that once experienced the mind cannot pretend that the events experienced did not occur. They cannot be erased and so you risk dirtying the only tool you have to explore your own mind. If drugs have a value it is in aiding the sceptical unbeliever to recognise and doubt the illusion they are perhaps trapped in. Such a forced breaking of the veil, though, often leaves the experiencer shattered and in some ways dysfunctional if the mental thought patterns that might allow you to accept such a revelation have not had cause to develop, and are not in place. Even when they are partially there, as may have been the case with me, you can fear for your sanity as I did. It is not for nothing that the spiritual traditions that use drugs require the guidance of an experienced shaman or guide.

Later in life I came to realise that all cultural traditions are scattered with clues in the form of myths, stories, and works of art, all of which can assist and guide the mind to recognise some of these aspects and perhaps move the seeker's mind in the right direction. All of life, though, is risky and so it is for individual

consciousnesses. I have to wonder if I would have ever come across or recognised the inner bond some of these things have with me without at least the first experience.

I know that many are moved but many may miss the true significance of these experiences. At school my fellow students did not consider poets like Shelley, Blake and Wordsworth anything worthwhile. They were something boring you had to learn about in English. Taught differently, I might have felt a closer and earlier bond with them. Yet later as I developed on my own I came to recognise in their words shared experiences. This situation is perhaps made even more starkly aware to me, because I seemed to be the odd one out in my family and social environment. No one talked of great works of art, flowers were just pretty things, music extended to the latest popular ditty and life was more about survival than any other kind of activity. I was always recognised as the dreamer and largely dismissed as such and I remember this because my family seemed concerned for me and, I think, my ability to survive. They saw it as a problem and perhaps in practical terms it is. But this problem, if it is one, perhaps originated with what I felt that spring day about a clump of moss.

The change the second experience brought about was far more obvious. I was older and had rejected religion because my experiences of it in a Catholic boarding school transgressed and did not match up with the feelings I had about the natural world and its sensuality. The nuns, apart from two, were not able to match up with the sentiments they taught either. So, I turned to science and learning to explore the meaning of life. I must have been about the only boy in the boarding school who wanted and prized books of knowledge and encyclopaedias for his birthday, but it came as a bit of a mental shock, that day, to realise that there was something I could perceive about the world around me that science did not seem able to answer in that simple flower. So, my life changed into that other direction that has meant something to me—the arts.

The art rooms were across a hallway from the science labs and my art teacher was obviously very happy when I expressed the sudden desire to make art my main subject, because I wanted to explore colour and how to depict it and my poor science teacher was equally dismayed. Of course the change was brought about because I had discovered for myself the notion of qualia and the challenge it poses since at that time it was not a subject recognised in school science classes. You could say the transcendence into orange definitely altered my life.

The third experience brought about the biggest change, however, because it was so overwhelming on all fronts. I often puzzle why I did not turn immediately to God and the Christian religion as a result of it as so many others obviously have. I suspect though that by then the habits of a scientific attitude and a desire to learn and explore had taken root in my personality along with a sense of atheism born in resentment of all things religious. Although I recognised that there was something religious about the experience I could only express it in terms like—*I thought I had been to heaven*. I could say this because it was like the ordinary world had been transformed into heaven, so joyful and exhilarating were the

feelings it had inspired. Yet I had not seen a God. Only later on in reflection and study did I come to wonder if God might not have shown me where heaven was—in the here and now in heavy disguise.

Almost the second book I came across after my uncle had lent me his was Richard Maurice Bucke's, *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901/61). The tone of this book was very much concerned with the question of consciousness and its evolution onto a higher plane. This very much set the theme for me because the idea that consciousness was in the process of evolving fitted well with my scientific inclinations. My problem was that I wanted my consciousness to evolve. Now that I had an explanation along with a distant, in time and place, community of human beings who I knew had had similar experiences I no longer feared for my sanity. I wanted more than anything else to return to that glorious state of mind. Who would not want to exist in heaven?

Without a fellow mystic to confide in and learn from I quickly recognised that Buddhism seemed to offer a path of study that might enable me to achieve that mental state again and so began a long association with Buddhist teachings that led me in turn to Taoism and eventually back to the Judaic tradition and its associations with Gnosticism and the ancient classical world. Without this third experience I would not have explored these traditions.

On the practical front I initially continued exploring the arts for to have perceived the presence of heaven in the normal world only enhanced my interest in beauty and design. So the experience confirmed my career development. However, the commercial aspects of the design world did not appeal to me. An opportunity to teach people with physical disabilities ceramics led me into an interesting area. Here for the first time I was brought into contact with human conditions that affected the mind—people who had suffered strokes, brain injuries, mental illness and later those whose development had been thwarted by accident and incidents of birth. Many years before, when at the Catholic boarding school I had attended an annual holiday camp. Shut away behind a wire fence were other strange children, unfortunates, who we were told had intellectual disabilities and who we were kept away from.

Contact with these people gave me much to ponder on and in later years I entered university to study developmental disabilities and with the advent of the Internet, caught up with the consciousness studies movement. I doubt that without this experience of transcendence that I would have pursued these paths in life. I would most likely have ended up as a draughtsman, if only, because it is better paid. My contact with, and interest in, the consciousness of people with disabilities, especially those with developmental disabilities, has enhanced my own understanding of the nature of my own consciousness and theirs. My contact with this arena of life and Buddhism is unlikely to have occurred without this incident of transcendence. It was Buddhism that made me realise that the issue for them and me was really the nature of consciousness and the problems that this posed.

There can be no doubt this third experience of self-transcendence changed me as well as my view of reality quite drastically. In some ways for years I was disturbed by that sense of timelessness and spatial distortion that revealed to me that space and time are probably illusory. Despite all these changes and the path that I have followed, it sometimes seems to me that I am still my old self again; the boy that awakened to the mosses, but I am changed profoundly in my thinking and questioning by all these experiences.

As a result of them I feel I possibly have had a lot more to think about. The most pressing questions, initially, were just what was it that I had experienced? Why had no one told me? What was this all about? If I consulted a doctor or someone would they think me mad or at least strange? Would this happen again? Would I be able to stand it? What would happen if I stayed in such a state? I feared that in reality I would appear to be frozen into immobility in everyone else's eyes? Perhaps I would be placed in some asylum while inwardly I roamed and manipulated the stars? Should I tell anyone? As a fairly isolated sixteen-year-old these were my initial thoughts and concerns. I was very uncertain about it all. Now my understanding has matured but I still have that puzzle—how to achieve that state of mind again.

The final experience in some way seems to have blocked any others from happening again. This is because in moments when I get close to it, and this happens quite often, it is my awareness of it that seems to prevent it occurring again. I can best describe it as that when the veil that hangs over heaven moves and shifts there is such an instantaneous jump in my thoughts and awareness that the expectation seems to involuntarily send my consciousness away from the state of transcendence so that although I often experience the immanence of transcendence it seems that achieving it permanently as my normal state of consciousness will always be more difficult. Yet I work on and I feel it will always have the effect of enhancing my understanding.

The experience has given me the view that reality is not what it seems. To me even the teachings of science confirm that what reality is for most people is an illusion just as eastern traditions state when they say all is maya. For me reality is a matter of consciousness. I tend to operate from a perspective that it is all illusion. We are really in a situation where our consciousness tends to create life and existence rather than that we are subject to and depend upon this reality.

This stance throws up many philosophical questions and issues that will stray outside of this essay. Suffice it to say that I believe one day, when enough people have experienced transcendence, it will become obvious that the reality we experience is, in fact, no more than what consciousness paints upon something else and that something else may well prove to be consciousness itself creating the dream in which it can explore itself. This is probably the core effect that the experience of self-transcendence has had upon me.

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Article

A Longitudinal History of Self-Transformation Psychedelics, Spirituality, Activism and Transformation

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Abstract: *A longitudinal historical approach for portraying and examining personal transformation is presented along with a proposed instrument—the Transformational Codex—for cataloging that history and the elements that compose it. One element, psychedelic transformation, is then discussed in depth along with a schema for viewing transformations that may occur related to psychedelic use and practice.*

Key Words: transformation, psychedelics, spirituality, consciousness, dreams, Buddhism, empathogens

A Longitudinal View of Personal Transformation

I am 67 rapidly approaching 68. Aging is transforming my physical capacities, my desires—fewer of them; my interests—perhaps more of them; my sense of time—moving faster and less of it; and the immediacy of death itself—close by, inevitable. My mental abilities have yet to atrophy—so I am told—for how would I know if I lacked them? I have spent my life transforming. I am certainly not with the consciousness I can remember from its inception. Nor from my teenage years. Nor even from my thirties and forties. Yet I have a sensation of continuity and that commences with my first memories at about 3 and includes a sense, a feeling, of me-ness. I seem still to be enough of the *me* that arose that I recognize a strand.

Life is truly a dream and my experience seems more and more a mediation between me and my past, and me and the world outside. It is this sense from which more profound psychological states of dissociation arise. I am fortunate in that I have dreamt the entire night, every night, so long as I can remember. If sleep architecture with its discontinuities and non-dreaming states is to be believed, it does not correspond to my own uninterrupted experience of constant nightly movies. The usual marking of day and night is more of a slippery transition for me and while I have no trouble discerning the two consciousnesses from each other, I have virtually no experience of being fully unconscious. My three surgeries with general anesthesia gave me the most pertinent information on ceasing to be—complete darkness being the sensation from which arising consciousness emanated. Before that sensation of darkness, I had no prior sensation of existence whatsoever.

All of this convinces me and highlights my sensation of a stream of consciousness that begins for me at about 3 years of age, also emanating from

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darkness, and continues unbroken, like a moving river, a dream state, during each 24 hours, part of the time in contact—more or less—with a mediated reality outside of me, and part of the time just with me, an interiority, that also has an awake interiority that is more cognitive, less imaginal than night dreaming, but with many of the same elements, sensations and removal from direct sensory contact.¹

If personal life is a moving, shifting stream dream, how then to view transformation? There is that classical argument in Zen schools between gradual and saltatory transformations, getting to Kensho and Satori. The same dualism occurs in Vajrayana Buddhism with schools making differing claims on the means for transformation, the prerequisites, the rapidity and the immanency. If I have learned anything, it is that there are as many schools as there are humans. Even my dogs have their views and requests, which they espouse in their own ways, according to their capabilities of reaching my awareness, and my capabilities of understanding their communication—some of that an empathic mutual understanding

What many do agree upon is that they experience transformation of consciousness and life behavior both gradually and also in sudden spurts of fierce energy and realization. And the direction is not always pleasant. Transformation can go either way, through unpleasant experience and chosen unpleasant means, and through pleasant, even ecstatic states. Transformation can be courted, seduced, planned, practiced for over time, induced, and can be involuntary, unplanned, damaging, life-threatening, grievous and disabling. Since conscious life is an experience related to a seamless existential dreaming, transformation is a constant moving thing. Peak experiences, as per Maslow, may entail transformation—or not, whereas transformation may contain or entail peak experiences—or not. Historically, discussion of transformation has focused on mystical and sudden transformations that are often only partially integrated and are experienced as ‘stand alone’ experiences, unclassifiable and ineffable.² While such significant events are unforgettable and momentous, they tend to be overemphasized and obscure other more prolonged experiences of fundamental change and the effects of deliberate practices aimed at transformation.

Here is my definition of *transformation*: *A change in one’s core conceptual and even physical structure that interrupts the prior sense of self and induces an altered, at least partially different sense of self immediately and/or over time with some degree of persistence.* Transformation is a reset of the old software with at least some new programming.

So, my experience of “me” over time is that I have changed and that this has been reflected in my contexts, connections and behavior. I am unable to isolate a single experience as *The Transformational Transcendent Singular Event* (TTSE). I am unlike Saint Augustine for example. Rather, as I look back over time, there have been numerous transformational moments and processes, a catalog of which would

¹ Wm James (*A World of Pure Experience*, in *William James Writings 1902-1910*, Library of America, 1987, pp. 1180-82) explicates interestingly on his experience of seamless mind.

² Cf. Berenbaaum, Kerns and Raghavan, *Anomalous Experiences, Peculiarity and Psychopathology*, pp. 30-31, in Cardena, Lynn and Krippner, *Varieties of Anomalous Experience*, APA, 2000.

be voluminous and necessarily incomplete because of faulty memory and inadequate retrieval—too much time and too many events. If this seems too mundane, not sufficiently spectacular, one factor is that of time, which blunts immediacy and tall peaks. Nonetheless, it appears to me to be a truthful representation of my experience that goes back as far as I am able to remember. If transformation is not restricted to peak experiences, but rather to an awareness of change over some time scale, it is clear that transformation is not discrete, has long slow waves and sudden lurches, and things in between.

Some transformation is clearly developmental but still contingent. For example, I recall falling in love (FIL) at 3 to 5 years of age. After we moved away when I was seven, I never saw any of the three girls with whom I played in my early Manhattan apartment house culture. Yet, I was permanently altered by an awareness of attraction at that age that made me scan for them as I went about my days and made me miss and think on them. Dreams of them occur even now—their names affixed to imagined representations of them as adult women who come in and out of my dream life on occasion. The integration was my experience of love and arousal for girl strangers with whom I bonded at a high level—non-sexual but aroused intimacy. In that same early period I made close friendships (FNDS) with boys and had a very different, but complex and loving set of feelings for them—friendship as a mode arose in me—clearly both of these kinds of affection transformational and not inevitable. Thereafter, I sought out both experiences throughout my life. When we left for Queens and a small, isolating private house, I grieved and was depressed for quite some time. That too was poignantly transformational as I learned of loneliness and the inability to rectify my heartbreak, and the arbitrariness of adult authority—out of touch with my love and need for my companions. Transformational indeed. In childhood, transformations are a frequent part of life and development, but from the adult vantage point we forget that we were incredibly mutable and affected—by love, trauma, and the vectors of growth and mastery. Nevertheless, the notice internally of the occurrence of a transformational experience is set-up during childhood.

A taxonomy can be developed for transformational experiences:
Time scale: *sudden, short-term, or prolonged*. Volition: *deliberate and just as planned, or not at all as planned, or inadvertent*. Integration: *integrated, partially integrated, or stands alone*. Quality: (increasingly positive) *Ah ha; Aah haa; Aaah haa!* Or (increasingly negative) *Oy, Oy vey, and Ouuuy veey*. Validated: *you are different, or not different*. Self-validated over time: *I am different* — my consciousness, choices, and actions are different. Duration: *a lasting change, absorbed*—fully or partially, overridden, or *deleted*. Awareness: *immediately conscious, semi-conscious, or unconscious* (became aware downstream from the event). Clearly these are continua and capable of being placed in a matrix: *The Transformation Codex*. I use *codex* deliberately to represent the book of changes, which can be compiled for any of us, at virtually any stage of life.

The Transformation Codex

EVENT	AGE-- WHEN	TIME SCALE	VOLI- TION	INTEGRA- TION	QUALI- TY	VALI- DATED	SELF VAL- IDATED	DURA- TION	AWARE- NESS
Early Love FIL	3 on	P	IA	I	AH	V+/-	SV+	ALC+	SCs, UCs
Friend- Ship FNDS	3 on	P	IA, then D+/-	I	3AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	SCs, UCs
Leaving Home LHC	16	S	D+	I	2AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs
First Psychoth FPE	17-18	ST	D+	I	3AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, SCs, UCs
Mature Love FMLS	17-18	ST	D+/-	I	3AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	CS
College CIGA	17-20	P	D+/-	I	AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, UCs
Trip LSDT	21	S	D-	I	3AH	V-	SV+	ALC+	Cs, UCs
Sixties SM	20--	S, P	D+/-	I	3AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, UCs
Family FB	27--	P	D+/-	I	3AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, SCs, UCs
Loss LOAC	44	S, P	IA	PI	OV2	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, SCs, UCs
Buddha BP	52---	P	D+/-	PI	2AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, SCs, UCs
Psyche- delic PP	40---	S, P	D+/-	PI	2AH	V+	SV+	ALC+	Cs, UCs

Key:

Transformation Event Time Scale—sudden, short-term, prolonged: S, ST, P

Volition—deliberate-just as planned, somewhat, not at all as planned: D+, D+/-, D-
 or—inadvertent: IA

Integration—integrated, partially integrated, stands alone: I, PI, SA

Quality—positive-Ah ha, Aah haa, Aaah haaa: AH, 2AH, 3AH—negative-Oy, Oy vey,
 Ouuy, veey: O, OV, OV2

Validated—V+, V- Others concur or give evidence of my change.

Self-Validated: —I am different and my consciousness, choices and actions are
 different: totally, somewhat, not at all: SV+, SV+/-, SV-

Duration—A lasting change: fully, partially overridden, deleted: ALC+. ALC +/-, ALC-
 Awareness of the occurrence and nature of Transformation—immediately
 conscious, semi-conscious, unconscious: Cs, SCs, UCs

For translation of the event abbreviations, see below.

To play with this classificatory schema, I will share with you a partial temporal review of some of my transformational experiences, with the classification as above—to validate the instrument and to tweak your own sense of history and its partial correspondences:

- Leaving home for college (LHC)—transformation—partial independence and autonomy.
- First psychotherapy experience (FPE), at college—transformation—reduction of tyrannous super-ego influences, finding my own mind and speaking it.
- First mature love and sexuality (FMLS)—transformation—being loved by another fully (or as much as possible under those circumstances), less self-conscious and negative.
- College intellectual growth and assurance (CIGA)—transformation—-independent thinking possibility enhanced social capacity.
- LSD trip (LSDT)—transformation—loss of fear of incipient madness, access to another realm of mind, enhanced imagination and creativity, unique experience.
- Sixties Movement (SM)—transformation—citizen of the world, brotherhood/sisterhood, loss of fear of confronting authority, physical trauma, enhanced creativity and empowering sensation of freedom.
- Family building (FB)—transformation—experience of the absolute love of children, new sense of wider responsibilities and larger sense of self, enhancement of the child consciousness within.
- Loss of a child after prolonged illness (LOAC)—transformation—loss of orientation and meaning, permanent grief, dissolution of marriage, extraordinary anxiety, greater coping skills, awareness of my own imperative to stay alive.
- Buddhist practice (BP)—transformation—explicit meditative states and freedom occasionally from grasping and attachment, valuing that experience and seeking it.
- Psychedelic practice (PP)—transformation—sudden dissolution of my self and reconstitution—deliberately sought for its transformative power; experience of group mind and being out of my own particular body experience; improvisation and intuitive mindfulness and creativity.

Examining my chart indicates the variety of powerful transformational events spread over a lifetime, their different experiential time frames, my tendency to focus on events that resulted in what I regard as long term and integrated changes, and the mix of inadvertent and deliberately sought for experiences. The list is suggestive and not meant to be exhaustive by any means. I hope it provides an encouragement for others to look at their history.

Some limiting factors: To reach significance, a transformative experience has to be at the level of an *Ah* or an *Oy*. The duration of an experience can be prolonged and over years of time. Aging tends to diminish former peaks and there is an

undoubtedly *besotted with change*—a change tolerance factor—that alters the drama of change to some incalculable effect. Finally, this is an almost entirely subjective method, save for the subjective awareness of others' views of our sense of transformation, which has some verifiability attached.

Psychedelics and Transformation: A Personal Overview

One set of the transformative experiences I have sought over a major portion of my personal history has been with the non-compulsive and deliberate use of psychedelic substances. As with most people who repeat, an initial powerful experience oriented me to the possibility for inner work and alternative experiences—that I would be different as a result of use and these differences would be sufficiently beneficial to explore additional trips and different mind-altering substances. I will present a schema for looking at the allure of these substances and their transformative powers.

First, a bit of background to situate the presentation of subjective states.

Psychoactive substance-induced alteration of consciousness is ages old, the specific history dependent on humans' particular geographic location and corresponding native plant habitats. Differentiating between our equally ancient propensity to get high with those particular substances that induce intoxicated states and, in contrast, the often difficult journey of the psychonautical pioneer is an imperative for clarity about psychedelic use—although there is certainly a mid-region of experience where recreational use meets transformation, and the inadvertent is always a potentiality. The remarkable discovery, perpetuation, refinement of use, and sacralization of psychoactive substances in early and stone age cultures testifies to the timeless power of human interest in transcending “ordinary” historical and cultural realities and the enduring strength of human mind exploration. Marijuana use dates at least to 4000 years BCE, the earliest plant remains known having been dated to that time. Humans and marijuana have co-evolved, influencing each other reciprocally in terms of cultivation and culture. Mushroom and other psychoactive plant use in Mesoamerica is undoubtedly thousands of years old and was ineradicable despite the deliberate murder of practitioners by the Inquisition and genocidal suppression of indigenous cultures by the colonizing Europeans. In fact, Europe was desperately poor in psychedelics these being limited to the toxic tropane alkaloids contained in such plants as mandrake and henbane with their datura like effects. European consciousness developed its particular distortions in concert with the addictive and easily manufactured toxin known as ethanol—of limited value for mental and spiritual transformation. Most remarkable is the Amazonian creation of ayahuasca, or yage, the admixture of two separate plants that had to be bundled to create the remarkable oral DMT based experience that was practiced as divination and personal transformation by native shamans. Ayahuasca use has recently spread to North America culminating in the US Supreme Court's recognition of the União do Vegetal (UDV) with *hoasca* as an acceptable sacrament and indispensable part of the UDV Church's ceremonial life, much as peyote for the Native American Church—

deliberate uses of mind altering substances for the purpose of transformation within bounded social and religious frameworks.

As to the allure of psychedelics, the most potent explanation is that they offer the possibility of a transformation of consciousness. That may occur as an intimate acute experience or a form-shaking permanent alteration; it is a spectrum of effect and affect that has incalculable personal and social consequences. The introduction of psychedelic substance use to masses of people in the sixties was a major influence on the immense cultural change that occurred. Liberation from the suppressive, repressive yoke of McCarthyism that had penetrated darkly into the family culture of the late 40s and 50s was in part due to the mind expansion of psychedelic use that blew up restrictive mental fetters and fear of the personal imagination. This was transmuted reciprocally to and from new cultural and political formations. If the entire New Left didn't succumb to rigid and dogmatic Leninism, it was to a great extent protected from that by personal mind-expanded experiences that escaped control by all ideologies and false consciousness. But it is not a perfect record and psychedelics were also used to corrupt and control humans. For example, from opposite perspectives, there was the final catastrophic period of the Weather Underground; and the CIA has had a compulsive interest in using psychedelics adversely to extract information or to create group and personal confusion, even madness.

Some aficionados of the pure psychedelic experience argue that the unmitigated experience itself is sufficient to deliver transformation. There are others such as me, who find that the transformative influence of the psychedelic experience makes a quantum leap when integrated with spiritual practice, such as Buddhist contemplation and with liberating psychotherapy. Unsupported psychedelic experience is unpredictably transformative and integrations from the spirit side with ordinary lived reality are more difficult without recognizing that psychedelic transformation is but one prong of conscious intent to transform ourselves from the capture of the corporate materialist culture. That is not a simple or straightforward task.

To convey the varieties of psychedelic experience is to have the experience of words faltering as descriptive. Hopefully, without intending to reify, or circumscribe, I will present a taxonomy of experience that reflects my personal history and observations over 47 years time, since I and a small group of new friends just commencing medical school in New York City dropped acid, i.e, LSD. With this I am attempting to convey the psychedelic allure and am using *states* rather than some hierarchical notion based on *levels* since all such states have value for transformation.

The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience

1. *The Mundane State*: Conventional allure flows from curiosity, a desire to change oneself, temptation for forbidden fruit, and emulation of others.

2. *The Personal/Psychotherapeutic State:* In 1964, I was a young, awkward, and self-conscious male, repressed and having just finished a psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapeutic experience that had helped me to alleviate some of the pain of my hypercritical feuding parents that I had introjected. I was beginning to find my own voice and guidance. In the flash dance of a few hours, my inner structure rocked and shifted. LSD and I met and I passed through great fear to feel alleviated of self-hate; my imagination was freed to inform a creative new consciousness. Art came alive, as did every day experience. After I came down from the LSD trip, integration included a deliberate determination to hold onto that freedom informed by a structural psychological awareness that had been obtained in the intensity of my earlier psychotherapy experience. Subsequent introduction to marijuana freed me of physical and sexual awkwardness, turned me onto intimate discourse, a heightened closeness in friendship, and furthered my sense of being a creative person. This was not completely linear—there were ups and downs—and took place with absorption in the growing *Movement*, a sense of being in a community of progressive people worldwide. Psychedelic use in that formative period increased my self-confidence and sensuality. It did not prevent me from making all manner of errors in personal and political life, but I was much better at discernment, moving on, kindness and forgiveness.

Psychedelic use invariably affects the personal/psychological matrix. Starting a journey forces an encounter with fear—of the unknown, of the lurking dangers believed hidden in one's own mind—of *losing it* or going too far into the irrational and unknown, of coming back madly altered. In the encounter the first period is generally absorbed with the personal—relationships, guilt, love, longing, grief, attachments, self-concepts. This encounter opens the possibility of examination, release, and change, of reframing and heightened awareness of self and the other(s). A bad trip—usually in an uncomfortable setting under stressful circumstances—can result in fear, paranoia, and recoil from the opened space that is perceived as threatening. Some folks never use psychedelics again. Occasional, too, young people and others—I know personally of several 12 and 13 year olds—suffer with mental effects that damage and may last far too long. *Set*—the mind's orientation—and *setting*—the circumstances of use—always affect the quality of significant psychedelic experiences. Conscious preparation, good location, presence of support and friends benefit experiences and outcomes.

3. *The Empathic State:* Generally any psychedelic experience may heighten empathy and empathic awareness—as love and affection; as the ability to see another's point of view and put oneself in the other person's shoes; as deep respect and regard; as elimination of barriers that separate; as communion with nature; as a transcendent feeling of warmth for all things. In the eighties, the potency of MDMA was recognized as a means, a tool, for heightening the quality of communication between people and for fairly reliably producing a state of warmth, affection and usually non-sexual sensuality. Many therapists including myself introduced MDMA psychotherapy within couples, family, and group contexts. Because the experience was fairly replicable, generally positive, and without much in the way of distortion and

hallucination, a new name was coined for a cluster of substances for which MDMA—Ecstasy—was the exemplar: *Empathogens*. Before the DEA's own administrative law judge, those of us who saw MDMA's potential for positive impact were able to demonstrate its medical utility. Despite the judge's ruling, which would have placed MDMA in an accessible Schedule II classification, the DEA went against its own judge's finding and placed it in the highly criminalized and inaccessible Schedule I group of substances that included heroin, and other banned psychedelics. In the years that followed the 1986 ruling, MDMA use soared and the *rave* phenomena began—again a testimony to the power of the substance to facilitate loving, intimate, sensual experience, even with huge numbers of people. MDMA's appeal continues to be based on the facilitation of a state of communion and community larger than the personal self's usual strictures allow. MDMA consciousness can be learned and generated without the drug on board as part of an expansive, loving daily life. Much of the concern about brain damage due to serotonin depletion was based on phony research that was retracted from the literature when it was exposed. After almost 30 years of use, 24 of it in this continuing prohibition era with an unimagined scale of use, 100s of millions of doses consumed, my informal census of other therapists and friends who were there from the start fails to reveal names and numbers of MDMA brain damaged individuals.

4. *The Egotytic State*. For the most part the psychedelic experience exerts a damper on egotism and ego centrality. A sense of smallness and particulate being in the universe may be a fundamental part, i.e., *I am truly insignificant*. A reduced sense of attachment to material goods, awed with life and the psychic ground, spaciousness of mind, a situating of the self as but a speck in the cosmos, and a sense of ease at being free of self-inflated importance may compose much of the trip. For some, this can be difficult and disorienting as a loss of the centrality of self and confusion as to how to manifest and re-integrate. For most this state provides a welcome relief from the tension of being a particular totalization in the personal world and the competitive, demanding outer life.

5. *The Transcendent Transpersonal State* [TTP]. Stripped of ego, personal psychology and investments, the psychedelic traveler enters the ground state from which thought, feeling, form and formlessness emanate. It is as if the source of mind becomes the mind experience itself. This is certainly not restricted to psychedelic states. In the unadorned meditative experience, this too is highlighted for periods of time. An apocryphal story from those who travel in both the spiritual and psychedelic realms is that the great guru drops a bizillion micrograms of LSD and stays beaming and untouched the entire trip time and is in his nature so spiritually elevated that the drug is not altering or transformative: he is the ground state itself. Ram Dass amongst others is fond of this tale. I have my doubts. In the psychedelic state is the flux, the movement, of stimulated consciousness, there to be experienced at a heightened level of manifestation. Some psychedelic experiences are difficult to recall and/or difficult in which to maintain a self-observational awareness. However, most experiences include intense observational awareness. Dose is a

factor—generally, the more you take, the more self-observational awareness tends to diminish, and the more the trip proceeds like a roller coaster to which you hang on.. It is my view that psychedelics tend to make mind and the origination of mental phenomena more available for experience and non-judgmental scrutiny by amplifying the phenomena coming into being. This state is what Tibetans refer to as *Dzogchen* or *primordial awareness* as it is commonly translated, the *sunyata* state in Sanskrit, and in the less developed Western explication, the state of awe. By learning to reside in a non-dualistic state of mind, by choosing to enter that state, by having experiences that create faith in the goodness of that state, then spaciousness, creativity, and compassion can arise from non-attachment, from living in the flow, from not grasping at every object that comes to mind and attracts our attention.

Within the *Transcendent Transpersonal State*, a multiplicity of experiences and views will arise and are generally not pre-programmable, but have some degree of specificity depending on the substance ingested—different substances tend to produce a quality of experience specific to those substances—and state of mind. I will mention a few by description that I class as *Vistas*. This is certainly not meant to be exhaustive:

5a. *The Sensual Universe Vista*: traveling through space as on a rocket ship, or being that rocket ship, I encounter extraordinary forms and shapes. Neon colored blazing fractal worlds open. Forms emerge—animals, beings from other galaxies, lovers and forgotten friends. I morph to meet them and my morphing morphs. I am eaten and eat, am absorbed and absorb. Sexual encounters may occur. Love spills everywhere. Or fear brings on its own forms and monsters. Psychological themes come from my everyday life and are given forms, often allowing for a working through of trapped emotional energies. There is a sense of great exploration and great bliss, and at other times of the terror of being alive and vulnerable.

5b. *The Entheogenic Vista*: A personal experience of being a god or deepening a relationship to the personally held notion of god may occur. One may have a sense of traveling in the starry cosmos freed from all constraint, or being part of a newly created and unique universe. Buddhists are told that they have, as do all sentient beings, *Buddha Nature*. In the psychedelic realm, I became the Buddha and felt that meaning and that responsibility. I moved about as the Buddha. I have tried to maintain that sense of awesome responsibility in my usual unenhanced state, with modest success and awareness of the difficulty. At other times, there can be the sense of the devil within, of the play of evil and the hunter/murderer, which we also contain and constrain. In mind travelling, there is no risk in exploring this aspect of us, knowing and accepting of what we are capable yet explicitly reject.

5c. *The Connection Vista*: The experience of connection and interdependency gives rise to feelings of gratitude, love, humility, and the desire to benefit others. Our personal lifeline extends backwards through a near infinite

unbroken number of progenitors to the unformed stuff of the great earthly soup from which first life forms emerge—this may be experienced—and forward to the future as well. I have felt myself to be much as a mushroom sprouts from the great mycelial mass, its myriad threads stretching underground in all directions, sprouting beings who as their time ends return to the rich mulch while new sprouts, *humans*, emerge—a sense of vibrant biological immortality. Or, in contrast, the direct experience of the human mass as itself a cancer, having all of those characteristics: unrestrained expansionism, proliferation in all directions, lack of concern for others' needs and requirements, eating everything in its path, out of control. Or as group mind, the experience of sensation outside the confines of the personal body/mind, in resonance with the others with whom one is travelling as a new assemblage of the multiple consciousnesses present in which one's mind is experienced as intrapersonal and transpersonal.

5d. *The Solipsistic Vista*: I am the source of all that I experience. I create it. The outside realm—all of it—is a manifestation of my mind. This passes before me as I scan all of my creations from scientific texts to great vistas and friends and my partner. I am the author of life and death. Moving about within this perspective, I am able to revise what exists and what will be—for a time—until I am drawn back to the usual perspective of subject and object. That experience, while a false consciousness, increases the sensitivity to the difficulty of being an interpreter, removed from direct experience consciousness with only mediated awareness of the external and personal awareness of the interior. While in this inflated state, I am god and master of the universe, prophet, seer, enlightened being. And then there is the crash, and hopefully great humility.

Integration

In the post psychedelic condition, integration is the key to maintaining transformation. Integration is a function of intentionality—conscious and unconsciously maintained, or incorporated. Integration occurs both without effort, as a redesign of the central processor of our minds, and voluntarily as a deliberate effort to understand, find meaning, and as rectification of our behavior towards others and towards ourselves. The psychedelic experience in and of itself may be transformative of our consciousness, but support for change by deliberate and disciplined absorption in the myriad spiritual/emotional/psychological/activist opportunities for increasing clarity and breadth most probably results in a more long term and positive transformation of self. The human mind while extraordinarily plastic, adaptable, and mutable is also built with a great rubber band that returns us to our dominant character. This serves both as preserver of the integrity of the self and as a block to transformation—holding onto deluded Self.

Grounding in the world of the interior and the external world—finding balance—is a prerequisite for successful psychonautical voyaging and for a mind expansion that is in essence kind, creative, and loosens the spell of the propaganda-

filled social world we inhabit that tells us what to think and feel and especially what to desire and purchase.

To conclude, psychedelic exploration has been an intense part of this culture for several decades and part of the human world since its beginnings. Both inadvertent change from recreational use of mind-altering substances and the deliberate pursuit of a transformative path have occurred for many millions of people, yet, as a result of the illegal status of psychedelics, there has been a restricted discussion and sharing of experience, despite the extraordinary numbers involved. I have presented one schema among many possibilities for sharing and conveying transformations that occur with psychedelics and hope this inspires both research and sharing by others of the qualities of mind and behavior that result from psychedelic use as transformations of self.

Article

Transcending the Self Through Art
Altered States of Consciousness and Anomalous Events
During the Creative Process

Tobi Zausner, PhD, LMSW *



Travelogues (Figure 7)

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Abstract

The capacity for transcending the self through art arises from the creative process, an altered state of consciousness facilitating the occurrence of anomalous events such as precognition and interior visions that appear to be outside the spacetime of waking life. Frustration can trigger the far-from-equilibrium conditions necessary for creativity, while inspiration may seem as if its source is exterior to the artist, and the experience of flow, like a trance state, can produce an altered sense of time. Archetypes in the creative process link a single mind to the collective unconscious and works of art become self-opening worlds that create an expanded reality.

Keywords: creativity, art, altered state of consciousness, transcension, anomalous events, collective unconscious, precognition, flow, expanded reality, archetypes Creativity as an altered state of consciousness

Creativity as an altered state of consciousness

To create art is to surrender to the infinite. Although an artist may feel in conscious control of the work, it is only an illusion, a delusion of the ego. The best moments in painting* come when the self is completely transcended, temporarily annihilated, forgotten, and left behind. These states of consciousness, which involve a total lack of self-consciousness, cannot be entered into volitionally. Instead, they come on full blown and unaware like a waking dream. Not induced, they arise instead as the result of a deep focus on work, often combined with extreme frustration. Here, frustration becomes the energy source added to a system that produces a state change. Using a model from chaos theory, the energy of frustration helps to create the far-from-equilibrium conditions necessary for creativity (Zausner, 2007, 1996) and for altered states of consciousness during the creative process. Just as an oyster's nacreous secretions in response to irritation eventually form a pearl, so an artist's series of frustrations shape a work of art – and also so do the continued stresses we encounter shape our lives.

In his research on flow, Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1996) emphasizes the importance of turning adversity into challenge and notes that in the creative process there can be a distorted sense of time and a loss of self-consciousness. He says that “paradoxically, the self expands through acts of self-forgetfulness” (1996, p. 113). For an artist, self-forgetfulness can be a release from the prison of the ego and its resulting expansion may feel like transcendence. Whenever I create art there is a sense of transcending myself and I have created art with this sensation since early childhood. It is as if I am in another world, the world of the work in progress on my easel. As Heidigger said, art is its own “self-opening world” (1977, p. 168) and, when I change the piece I am working on, I also change worlds.

Other artists have expressed similar sentiments. Henri Matisse said, “When I started to paint, I felt transported to a kind of paradise” (cited in Sandblom, 1996, p. 31).

Marguerite Stuber Pearson revealed that, “I never seem to be very successful unless I am lost in what I am doing,” and also stated, “I can get lost in a thing and almost forget I’m here, especially if I am looking at light and color values” (Pearson, 1971). Artists can also appear to be in an altered state to observers watching them paint. Gløersen (1994, p. 83), a biographer of Edvard Munch, said of the artist that, “soon he was back in the sleepwalking condition characteristic of him when he was working.” The artists are exhibiting what Madill (1999) describes as an everyday trance, a frequently used adaptive mechanism that can sublimate extraneous impulses while supporting determination and focus on the work in progress. I believe artists have these dissociative yet functional experiences because absorption in painting¹ is a total immersion; it is swimming underwater through the currents of the unconscious mind.

Anomalous events in the creative process

Although I also find painting to be an altered state of consciousness, there are events within that state so extreme that they appear to be anomalous experiences. Anomalous events may be more easily facilitated during creativity because its ground is an altered state of consciousness. These anomalous experiences feel as if the normal boundaries of the self have given way to some meta-reality contiguous to our own yet different. As both a psychologist and an artist, I have tried to explain these events as aspects of a broader psychological reality and to discuss the psychological aspects of self-transcending events. Yet even with cited research, they retain a profound sense of the numinous and will in part always remain a mystery.

Source of inspiration



Figure 1

My most recent anomalous experience came in connection with a drawing, *The Philosopher’s Stone* (Fig. 1 & this issue’s cover), still a work in progress on my easel. The image, which shows a child reaching the light after crawling up a winding path in the darkness, refers to realization achieved through adversity. Looking at the drawing in early June 2011, I knew it needed something in the turn of the road. Still, I didn’t know what to put there that would symbolize transformation but be jarring enough to counteract the sweetness of the child. I had considered a snake or snakes but they didn’t fit. That morning, while sitting and looking at the work, I heard an inner voice very loud and clear, which did not sound like my own voice at all, say, “Wears yet a jewel in its head.” The phrase refers to a quotation from Shakespeare’s play *As you like it*: “Sweet are the uses of adversity, which like the toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious

¹ In this essay, painting is used as a generic for my visual art, although I also draw and make prints.

jewel in his head” (II:1, 12-14, CW, 1906). I knew immediately the voice was telling me to put a toad in the drawing and indeed that was the solution I sought. The toad is a crosscultural symbol of transformation and its association with the philosopher’s stone also provided a title for the drawing.

The experience of hearing the voice was startling, strange, and felt as if it came from a place outside of me. This type of occurrence supports the historical notion of a muse or external source of inspiration that was popular in antiquity. Plato (1950) considered inspiration to be a type of divine madness that made individuals the vehicles for gods. According to Harding (1971), Jungian psychology says that ancient people had these beliefs because they did not recognize an inner or psychological aspect to the self and, as a result, exteriorized mental events and flashes of insight. Although modern psychological theories argue for an inner source of origin, inspiration can still feel like an external stimulus and artists often see themselves as channels for creative energy. Paul Klee (1965, p. 387) wrote, “Everything vanishes around me, and works are born as if out of the void. ... My hand has become the obedient instrument of a remote will.” Marcel Duchamp (1973, p. 138) believed that artists such as himself were “mediumistic being[s].”

Psychoanalytic theory also posits an interior source for inspiration. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1965), Freud demonstrated the power of an unconscious mind that communicates symbolically with our waking consciousness. Indeed the phrase I heard, “Wears yet a jewel in its head,” is the type of oblique symbolic message that could appear in a dream. What was startling to me was hearing it out loud when I was awake. Even with psychological explanations, this voice and its message felt like a gift from a numinous realm. My response was surprise and gratitude, both of which I still feel today. If it was a message from the unconscious; it expanded my sense of reality through a deeper acknowledgement of layers of the mind. Yet maybe it was a combination of the spiritual and psychological. Perhaps the spiritual communicates more easily through the unconscious than directly to the conscious mind.

Experience of archetypes

Another anomalous experience came with the discovery that I was unconsciously using universal symbols in my art. According to Jung (1969), these symbols are known as archetypes and have similar meaning and content across cultures and throughout time. I had been working on a drawing, *The Gate of a Lifetime* (Fig. 2), which started out with a figure walking on the ground but after the multiple changes that all of my work goes through he was eventually walking in the sky. Still the figure needed support and I decided to have him walking on a ladder in the air. Synchronistically, the book I was reading by Eliade (1974) on comparative religion spoke about ladders as crosscultural symbols of ascension. I can still remember the moment I read that part because I had recently put the ladder in my painting. The knowledge that it was an archetypal symbol generated great joy along with feelings of connection and transcendence. All of a sudden I was no longer painting alone in a loft in New York. Instead, I was now a part of all humanity, linked by a great gossamer web of symbolic communication extending throughout a hyperspace of minds.



Figure 2

It is through creative activity's paradoxical fusion of a diffuse yet focused awareness that archetypes can enter the conscious mind and be used in art. The diffuse mindset promotes openness to ideas and archetypes. In the collective unconscious, archetypes are non-material psychoid essences (Jung, 1971, 1973). It is the artist's intensity of focus that transmutes them into the physicality of a work of art. Years ago when I thought of this process of inspiration, I visualized it as a simple model, the balancing of an infinitely large plane on a point. The plane was the collective unconscious with its archetypes and the point was the point of entry into the artist's mind.

Recently I realized that a more dynamically accurate metaphorical model would be to envision the use of archetypes in the creative process as type of communication between dimensions through a singularity similar in form to a black hole. It would be a transmission of information from the non-physical collective unconscious into our physical dimension and a work of art. In the model, the event horizon in the collective unconscious would have an accretion disk active with archetypes attracted by the work in progress that then pass through a rotating funnel leading to a singularity upon entering the artist's mind. In this model the artist's consciousness would function as the equivalent of a white hole, receiving information funneled through what is modeled as a black hole in the collective unconscious.

Painting without looking: Motor skills and memory

Jung (1927, CW-8: §180) once said, "Often the hands know how to solve a riddle with which the intellect has wrestled in vain." This happened to me late one night as I struggled for hours with clouds in the sky of *Memories* (Fig. 3), a large work in oils. I kept painting and repainting the clouds while feeling that I was getting nowhere. Finally in utter disgust I turned my head away from the canvas because I couldn't bear to look at it anymore. Nor could I stop painting – so I painted without looking at the canvas. After a while I looked up and there were the clouds I had tried in vain to create hours ago. The complete understructure of the clouds was on the canvas and when the paint dried it would be ready for the layers of glazes that bring richness and depth to an image. I do not think I would have been successful had I tried to look away while painting a face but in the wide swathes of clouds in the sky, somehow my motor skill memories painted what my conscious intention was unable to achieve.



Figure 3

Motor skill memory or muscle memory, which comes from repeating a task multiple times, forms a part of our everyday life. It underlies the ability to play sports or a musical instrument. While in visual art it is part of the hand and arm movement that guides the brush in painting, this almost always happens under the surveillance and control of the eye. In the case of *Memories* the eye was absent, yet the clouds came out perfectly in the right place in the sky, and did not go over the horizon line to mar the snowy landscape. I still do not know how this happened. Although this experience has a partly psychological explanation, it retains the feeling of an anomalous event, a gift from the universe in recompense for my frustration and perseverance.

Precognitive anomalous events

Not all of the anomalous events I have experienced while painting relate to psychological theory. Some, which are precognitive experiences, may have greater congruence with models in physics and the philosophy of science. Precognition is seeing or sensing an event before it happens and I am not the only artist who has had an intimation of future occurrences. When Antonio Verrio was twenty-one, he painted a portrait of himself as a blind man being led by a dog; by the time the artist died in his late sixties, he had lost his sight to cataracts (Trevor-Roper, 1988). A book, *The History of the Future* (Canto & Faliu, 1993) contains numerous images made by artists depicting their idea of life after the year 2000, many of them with surprising accuracy. Once relegated to science fiction, the existence of precognition has now been proven in quantified

experiments (e.g., Bem, 2010; Jahn & Dunne, 1987). Yet despite knowing this, each experience of precognition in my life still feels like an anomalous experience.

My earliest precognitive experience in art came when I was working on a painting of a man journeying through an undefined space of transition while losing all aggressive and defensive objects. I believed that these objects were not real but only mirages, hence the title *Transition Mirages* (Fig. 5). Several months after the painting was finished I read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1960) and realized that I had painted a soul traveling in the Bardo, which for most people, is a space between incarnations. It was a profound joy to learn this and made me feel part of something much greater than myself.

Another experience of precognition came as I was working on *The Pilgrim* (Fig. 4), an oil painting for which *Gate of a Lifetime* had been a preliminary study. I had been struggling with the path on which the figure was traveling. After innumerable failed attempts, I finally created the large white paving stones in the completed painting. Six months later on a trip to San Francisco I saw the exact stones I had painted. It was a great surprise to see them but again, it gave me a sense of connection to the world and to a greater reality.



Figure 4



Figure 5

My most disturbing experience of precognition happened when I painted the face of a



Figure 6

woman I had not yet met. Having an unexpected face appear in my work is a routine occurrence because when I paint faces, I almost never know how they will turn out or whom they will resemble. This is because while I start with a photograph at the beginning of a painting, I soon put it aside and paint from my mind. I can

consciously intend to paint one face but it unconsciously changes into another while I am working on it. In response to this I realize that while I create with conscious intention, I also create with unconscious intention. I always find it interesting when the faces in my work look like friends or relatives because I am almost never thinking consciously about the person who on the canvas. One day I was struggling with the face of the woman on the right in *Fair Game* (Fig. 6). After painting the face and then turpentineing it out and painting it again multiple times, I finally arrived at a face that I thought was suitable. The next day I met the woman, whose face it was. I was so shocked at seeing her that I went home and quickly obliterated the painted face on canvas. It is only now, as I write this essay that I realize why I had such a negative response. It was not just the shock but also that as I got to know this person I didn't like her and tried to avoid her.

One of my works, *Travelogues* (Fig. 7, see title page), which was intended to be about time travel, also has aspects of precognition. The paragraph about the work on my website (Zausner, 2009) is:

The image in *Travelogues* was inspired by Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, which says that in certain instances time can curve and even form a loop. At intersection of the loop, it is theoretically possible to meet yourself at another point in time. The German philosopher Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe appears to have had this experience. In his autobiography Goethe wrote that while traveling to Drusenheim he saw himself in his mind's eye coming toward him down the road but wearing clothes he didn't recognize. Eight years later Goethe was at the exact same point on the road, but this time he was coming from Drusenheim and realized that he was wearing the clothes he had previously seen but had not recognized years ago. The theoretical physicist Hsiung Tze, Ph.D., says the figure in this work looks like the mathematician Kurt Gödel meeting

himself in time. He notes that Gödel created a closed time-like loop solution to Einstein's theory of general relativity and also wore the same kind of hat. Other people have looked at this work and found solace because the man in the painting represents all of us. Like him, we too can persevere. If our buttons are gone or useless, we can hold our coats closed. If we have no gloves, we warm one hand with another. The important thing is to keep going – it doesn't snow forever.

Hsiung Tze's comparison of the figure to Gödel and his theories produced a feeling of transcension and connection because what I had painted resonated so accurately with another person's insight. I had no previous conscious idea of this connection. Another important aspect was reading Goethe's (1846-1847) experience of precognition and finding it mirrored the idea that inspired this image. Precognition has been with the human species since its inception, socially in the form of prophecies and personally as intuition. In an early scholarly work on precognition, Dunne (1969) demonstrated that dreams contain aspects of the future. To explain this phenomenon, he theorizes that there is an observer linked to us in another time space who has a more expanded view of our own dimension. I believe this observer is an aspect of our own consciousness that is dissociated enough to have a more comprehensive vantage point, yet connected enough to communicate with our conscious mind.

To metaphorically explain a precognitive vantage point, imagine a lifetime as a string of pearls. Each day we live would be represented by a pearl on the necklace, but with ordinary waking consciousness we can only see one pearl or one day at a time. The observer aspect of our consciousness can raise itself up and see further along the necklace of pearls. The entire string of pearls would correspond to our Minkowski timeline, the track of our existence through spacetime (Dunne, 1969). Glimpses of this timeline have the feeling of transcending the self because we see beyond the confines of ordinary consciousness. It is possible that this aspect of the self is more readily contacted during the creative process because it is a dissociative and altered state of consciousness. Like dreams, creativity involves imagination and visualization, both of which may assist in precognition and in accessing what Nixon (2010) describes as an underlying timeless universal now.

An unexplained self-transcending event

One of my most extraordinary experiences of transcending the self came during a vision I had while I was making a pastel drawing of a little Buddhist nun that I have now worked on further and made into a print called *The Eternal Present* (Fig. 8). While drawing, I had been having great trouble with the hands. Somehow the fingers were repeatedly coming out wrong and I felt stymied, blocked. Unable to continue working, I went to lie down and then saw this vision in either a meditative or hypnogogic state. There she was, the little girl in my pastel, but in the vision she was a real live moving child. I could see her clear as day and in full color although my eyes were completely closed. Gentle and smiling, she sat under a diffuse light shining from above, while opening and closing her fingers. The little girl was showing me how her hands worked to better model them for me because I had struggled in the art I was doing of her. I also had

the feeling she was looking at me, communicating without words. It felt as if she was a wonderful gift from some unknown realm, a spiritual place, somehow now existing in my consciousness. After seeing her open and close her fingers several times, I was able to return to the pastel and complete the hands.



Figure 8

This event does not lend itself to either psychological explanations or scientific models. What I saw was the image in my pastel drawing come alive and helping me. It was not an image of the photo I used for reference because the photo was an old black and white picture of two young girls that I combined into one. This was the child I was creating in pastel on paper, yet she had become a three dimensional living being in my visual field. Also it was not a case of eidetic imagery because she was moving and my pastel image was still. An eidetic image, according to Winner (1982), is a vivid detailed image of an object that is remembered but not physically present, yet its clarity makes it appear as if it is actually there.

Although the capacity for eidetic imagery is found more frequently in children and rarely in adults, I have eidetic imagery and I know of other visual artists who have it as well. I have used eidetic imagery as an aid in my work. During one painting, when I needed to see water flowing so I could reproduce it on canvas, I studied the water on a boat trip around Manhattan. After looking very carefully at the water and its movement, I then brought up the remembered images at home when I needed them. Those images were moving because they were from my memory of moving water.

The little nun was also moving but not from my memory of a still image on paper. Throughout this experience, the child looked completely alive and as if she inhabited a

place that was not in the spacetime of our everyday reality. The little nun appeared to be not only living but numinously alive; she felt like a miracle, a gift that completely transcends the self.

The gift of an expanded reality

As the result of a lifetime of painting, I never know where art will take me. Although it is a journey of my own making so little of it appears to be under my conscious control. The creative process with its anomalous events is an ongoing great gift of transcending the self. It demonstrates that reality extends far beyond our waking consciousness and even beyond what we can envision and consciously construct. What these experiences reveal is that we grasp what we believe to be reality, but it is only a small portion of the possibilities available in our multiverse. Reality is more extensive than we realize. Our everyday experience and waking consciousness form only the tip of an enormous potential with greater capacities than we can even imagine. What we know is only an infinitesimal part of what there is.

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Article

Breaking Out of One's Head (& Awakening to the World)

Gregory M. Nixon*

Abstract

Herein, I review the moment in my life when I awoke from the dream of self to find *being* as part of the living world. It was a sudden, momentous event that is difficult to explain since transcending the self ultimately requires transcending the language structures of which the self consists. Since *awakening to the world* took place beyond the enclosure of self-speech, it also took place outside our symbolic construction of time. It is strange to place this event and its aftermath as happening long ago in my lifetime, for it is forever present; it surrounds me *all the time* just as the world seems to do. This fact puts into question the reality of my daily journey from dawn to dusk with all the mundane tasks I must complete (like writing of that which cannot be captured in writing). My linear march to aging and death inexorably continues, yet it seems somehow unreal, the biggest joke of all. Still, I here review the events leading up to my time out of mind and then review the serious repercussions when I was drawn back into the ego-self only to find I did not have the conceptual tools or the maturity to understand what had happened.

Call to Adventure

For the sake of structure (and because I owe so much of my psychological resurrection to the man's writings), I will break apart this story and analysis into sections that accord with Joseph Campbell's famous stages on the journey of the hero in his *Hero of a Thousand Faces* (1949/68). The hero's journey is not a line of time going from past to future, but a circle that begins with the *Call to Adventure*, continues with crossing the *Threshold* from normal (social) reality into one much more dangerous but ripe with possibility. The hero must go through *Tests*, facing dangers (both fears and temptations), and heroes often fail. Then there is the *Attainment* (whether apotheosis or discovering of the treasure, etc.), followed by the *Return* back across that Threshold during which dangers of a different sort threaten while the adventurer attempts to reintegrate himself with society and with the self-identity that the society has provided. For me, the whole circle is more like a twisting spiral, forever uncoiling from *and* recoiling toward an empty centre that can never really, in its essence, be recalled. Perhaps because it is always present.

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The call began in discontent, which was as much a sign of the times as inner restlessness. I'm going to tell this story straight, without shame and without bravado, so you can believe me when I tell you that in my final high school years I was a robust and lusty youth, who was somewhat wild in the country. In Alberta, Canada, the youth revolution of the late sixties was late in arriving, so I was doing all the things an 18 year old male in the fifties ethos that preceded the hippy ethos would be expected to be doing. I had a regular girlfriend, "Ellen", with whom I was at last having sex as often and as long as possible. Naturally enough, I cheated on her with any other girl who would accommodate me. I was an athlete who won the grand aggregate in track and field, and I played on the high school football team as the fullback and jokingly called myself "The King" even though my touchdowns were few indeed. Not sure why, but the joke spread and soon the other students were greeting me with, "Hi King," in the hallways. Perhaps it spread because I hung out at a tough pizza joint on the north side of town called The King's Inn. From there, our gang would raid the south side and get into memorable brawls, or we would defend our territory should any southsiders dare to enter the Inn. I had a *rep*, but I was mostly well liked because I liked to fight loudmouth bullies but was not one myself. However, I got drunk at least every weekend, sometimes during the week, and my schoolwork, sports, family life (such as it was), and relationship suffered.

But I still felt restless. I yearned for adventure, to be sure, but also somehow felt that what the world was offering me had no real importance. Desire for conquest or fame was not the real me either. Fucking and fighting were ends of their own and a good way to laugh in the face of adult society. That put me in with a crowd who were in the non-academic stream or already out of school in the world of work. I did still did acceptably well in school in the matriculation (academic) stream (my mother pushed me) but the only subjects that held any interest were English and Social Studies, both containing stories of human adventure. I had emotionally divorced myself from home life, I thought, since my parents never got along and were soon to be divorced themselves. I disdained the few longhaired guys appearing in our town, the messy chicks with them, and the whispers of "drugs" that surrounded them.

Everything changed when an acquaintance from class, let's call him Jake, invited me to smoke some hash with him. I loved intoxication, so I was excited at trying a new way to achieve it. It was far the ordinary pot with its seeds and twigs that was being smoked at that time. It was Red Lebanese hashish, pressed and sent in an envelope to Jake from his Hari-Krishna sister now living in East Germany. We skipped school and smoked up in a little pipe made with a pen barrel stuck in thread spool. A broken pencil blocked the other end of the spool, and a needle-perforated tin foil pushed into the hole Jake had dug into the centre of the spool served as the pipe bowl. I learned quickly and the effect was very fast. This was not like drinking at all! The room tilted and the world seemed to be made of chuckles. I felt giddy and went with it while more experienced Jake went on about playing music and tasting apples. Suddenly I realized what a good guy this quiet, thoughtful neighbor from my classes was. It was the beginning of an eventful pothead friendship.

Jake became my main smoking partner and it wasn't long until we had graduated to headshop hookahs with almond extract flavouring the water and had hooked up with other heads around town. I was graduating high school and had finally discovered what the hippies and the burgeoning counter-culture were talking about: there was another way to be conscious! This way was open, laid-back, absorbed in the experience of the senses, especially music and psychedelic images. We were bound together by our discovery that what the social mainstream called a crime was in fact a gateway to warm friendship and higher consciousness. Mistrust of the establishment led many to abandon their old friends, schooling or employment and turn on, tune in, and drop out, as Timothy Leary suggested. I liked the scene, and I did drop my old friends, but I also entered university and hesitated to step fully into the new conformism of the hippy ethos, as I saw it. Within months of entering university, I had new friends, a new way of dressing, had given up all sports, never got drunk and violent, but was continuing to mess up my academic career by smoking the weed and experimenting with soft-core psychedelics.

Threshold

The lure of ... *something* had me in thrall. I can look back now and call it higher consciousness, and there's no doubt truth in that, but what, exactly, we were after at the time was not exactly clear. Jake and I would hit the library intent on reading up on eastern religions, meditation practices, or exotic rituals that were said to lead to transcendence. Most often, however, we ended up finding good stuff on various forms of psychedelics or more physical drugs that we had not yet tried, so we learned about that instead. Most of our education was in the streets, of course, and in the secret places where everyone shared what they had and all got high with good vibes in the air along with Janis Joplin, the Beatles, or the Jefferson Airplane. Of course, everyone had the fear of being caught, of *the man* bursting in upon us and locking us up like animals forever. In some people, this developed into a form of paranoia that interfered with the good vibes of the love generation. But, no matter, I had crossed the threshold.

I did lot various psychedelics and a lot of *weird things happened* to me and to others, sometimes simultaneously, but, in retrospect, it was never *out of this world*, just weird. My high school friend, "Jarot" (from both football and the King's Inn) and the little Japanese-Canadian girl that always seemed to follow him around with moony eyes, "Setcha", joined our group of high-flying explorers. At the end of the first school year in April, everyone I knew seemed to go somewhere out of town; there were a lot of hippy meccas like San Francisco, or, in western Canada, Vancouver or Nelson, drawing people to them. The highways were crowded with hitchhikers, and Jake and I made our way amongst them to the big city of Calgary. There I quickly screwed up a job as an encyclopedia salesman (my official reason for going there) and we fell in with local tripsters.

We dropped acid in a suburban house one night and this guy came in with his buxom young girlfriend. "Tell she's got big boobs," someone whispered to me, "She

really likes that." So I told her, she giggled a lot, and then sort of followed me around after that. As we all slouched quietly around the living room listening to the latest sounds, I saw her watching me, so looked boldly back at her through my everpresent red shades. The vibe we exchanged as we looked at each other was stirring, to say the least. I had big can of apple juice on my lap and made of use of it by staring intently right at the girl while slowly ripping the paper in strips down the sides of the can. Her eyes widened and she asked no one in particular, "What's he *doing*?" But she never looked away. Something real began to happen between us that may have been ectoplasmic sexual intercourse, if you'll forgive corny expression. The sexual vibe was electric, in motion, going forth and back between us. I could see shadows in the air intermingling. I would say it was all in my mind, but the girl felt it too, going deeply red and moaning, moving her body lasciviously. I felt myself growing tense and nearing orgasm when I noticed that several people, including her boyfriend, were wide-eyed, watching the invisible exchange between us. I felt like a thief, so I abruptly rose and left the room, breaking the spell. The girl came after me, but I waved her off. A friend whispered, "It's not cool to take another guy's girl, man."

Confused and guilty, I left the back of the house and went up on the hill outside that seemed to overlook the whole city. Weird as the exchange had been, my slow awakening awe at the city laid out before soon overwhelmed its memory. *What is really going on here?* I wondered to myself, thinking of all the people living their lives like busy insects below me. For the first time, I felt a tingling above me, like a doorway in the air beginning to open. I felt a blissful anticipation, then a thought: "Dare I go through?" and the doorway seemed to withdraw and close. I did not go through and I was feeling sad yet hyper-aware as I walked back to the house through the neighbourhood. A police car pulled up and asked me to get in. I grew tense but not frightened when they asked me what I was doing on the hill. I told them – in sad, trembling tones – that I was looking for work in the city and had just been looking over the city wondering about my future. They nodded sympathetically and spoke encouraging words and dropped me off at the house. The car drove off as I went inside and was greeted like some sort of hero. The police car had apparently freaked everyone out to the core of their trembling souls, and they were deeply relieved I had, in their eyes, saved them all from eternal imprisonment.

I mention this trip not because it has any deep significance but because it was the first time something completely *other* beckoned to me (at least the first time I had consciously noted it), something far beyond "weird things happening" (like the apple juice can incident). Though I had not gone through, I could not forget the *edge-of-miracle* sense that I had experienced. I told others about it and they pretended they knew all about it ("it's nirvana, man"), but Jake was the only one who listened. I wondered later if the opportunity for what I imagined must be transcendence had occurred because I had shown compassion by being, for once, unselfish, and keeping my distance from a friend's girl, despite the opportunity.

Later, I returned to my small city home and Dad informed me he had found me a job in the Northwest Territories as a deckhand. It seems a Department of Transport official from Hay River had stopped by his barbershop and, upon hearing of my lack of employment (and likely my waywardness), had offered to hire me immediately as a deckhand on a D.O.T. boat that put in buoys and light towers and kept the shipping lanes open for commercial transport on the Great Slave Lake. The season up there was just getting started as it was the end of May, so I shipped out on the Greyhound bus to Edmonton whence I was flown to Hay River on the shores of the big, cold lake and put aboard *The Dumit*, a government transport boat. I was excited by this new adventure, yet felt let down because so much was happening in the urban world to the south. I was going on one adventure at the cost of postponing another.

I need not have worried. By early July I had been fired for drunkenly sleeping through my turn at night watch. The first mate who got me drunk would not speak up for me and I could not apologize to the old Scots skipper, who hinted if I did I could keep my job. We were deep down the Slave River at that time, and it took nearly a month to get back to Hay River, so I had a lot of time to think about it. There was much I had seen and done in that short time, certainly grown stronger and richer compared with the year spent sitting around and smoking pot, but I was anxious to check in on my friends, whom, I had heard, were living in cheap cabins in the forest by the Strait of Georgia on Vancouver Island. My quest still beckoned.

I arrived back in my city just long enough to make rash, passionate love for two days to my still-abiding girlfriend, Ellen. I could not help but notice that, during the past year in the pot haze of university, I had not been so eager or vigorous. Then, with the callousness of youth, I left Ellen behind and caught a ride in a crowded little car with a group of acquaintances that took me right to Vancouver Island and even down from the highway on a curving gravel road to a little colony of cabins near the beach. Jarot, Setcha, and Jake were there in one cabin. Bill and Jay, two American draft-dodging dealers, occupied the cabin nearby but were temporarily on a mission.

“Well, Nixon is here. Now we can head down to California, right?” Jarot drawled as I arrived. It was nice to hear I had been awaited, but I had the vague intention of returning to university. After warm greetings and hugs, they dug out their bag of weed, which was nice, after the months in the north country, but nothing compared with hashish. I sensed some minor tension between Jake and Jarot that neither had with me, and I noticed how sexy Setcha looked in her skimpy outfits. Jarot, however, hardly paid her any attention. We smoked up, felt great, but soon ran out. Now what? I was the only one with money and I was willing to use it, but my friends only scored their weed from Bill and Jay who were not around. “I know where their private stash is,” Jake offered in low tones, as though he could not believe the words coming out of him. After intense discussion, we agreed that it *might* be okay if we took some out and left some money in the bag.

Needless to say, we smoked most of it and Bill and Jay were not happy dealers when they returned and found cash instead of their primo bud. “Cash ain’t grass, man,” Bill

said mournfully. But it really was incredible smoke, since, as I recall, I went on a walk alone in the woods with my brain singing and zinging, the twigs crunching beneath my feet, and the squirrels darting from tree to tree. Suddenly everything went silent. Even my brain activity paused. I stood still with that hair-raising feeling that something was about to happen. I heard the noise, low and far off at first, then the wind picked up volume and seemed to soar right through me. A small thing to describe, but I was shaken. It was as though I were being given notice that there was more here than meets the eye; the uncanny was afoot.

Bill and Jay eventually forgave us and we all set up a bonfire on the beach that night. Jake and Jarot talked passed each in quiet disagreement about *our* direction. Jarot confided in me what pain it was to have Setcha around. Jake confided in me how hot he thought she was. Across the fire, I misunderstood Setcha's inward gaze, thinking she was looking at me with sexual challenge. I tried to lie down with her, touching her. She pushed me away in shock and I, just as much in shock, returned to my spot. Neither Jarot nor Jake stirred one iota but gazed steadily at the flames throughout.

Later, Bill and Jay brought us hits of blotter acid we cut into little squares, one for each of us, and we tripped out in our cabins. One thing happened on that trip, but it was evidence of the rising tide against the gates of the normal *me*. We dropped the blotters, time went by, and nothing happened. Nothing happened and it showed; it felt heavy. We all withdrew into ourselves and busied ourselves with this or that, scrabbling around with a spot on the floor or absently turning pages in a picture book. Jarot scratched and yawned. We were waiting. *When is something going to happen?* We waited for the excitement to begin and in so doing became agitated and discontent. I watched everyone, Jake, cross-legged with his full black beard pawing away at something on the floor, Jarot looking around nervously, and Setcha trying to hum and move to some rhythm only she could hear. I felt edgy: there was a thought I was trying to resist. It kept coming closer and closer until it was on the edge of my mind. I resisted the apperception and sunk into myself, but it would not be denied: As clearly as anything I've ever seen in my life, the obvious was revealed to me and I felt the trapdoor of light open above me: "We're animals!" I burst out with relief. Everyone looked at me in confusion. "Don't you see? We're animals, here in this room, on this floor, we're animals!"

"Yeah? So what?" Jarot said. My revelation was obviously not as profound to my fellow tripsters. "Is that a bad thing?" Setcha asked. "We know that already," Jake said, then as his mental antenna opened up, he added, "Don't we?" Jake and Setcha looked vaguely hurt and Jarot confused, so they all three returned to their mundane, inwardly focussed preoccupations. I was very excited and felt like a tractor-beam was pulling me up toward that invisible trap-door. "Don't you feel it?" I asked trembling. Blank looks. "What?" Jake asked. "Don't you feel the ... " I paused shaking my hands in frustration at the lack of words: "Don't you feel like something is about to happen – something *big*?" Now they all three looked intrigued. I tried to explain what I was experiencing, but neither then nor now do I have the words. "It's like a door is opening, just above me ..." I tried, "like, like it's beckoning, and I really want

to go through!" "Why doncha?" Jarot asked. Was there a hint of malicious curiosity in his eyes? "What's on the other side?" asked Setcha. "What's stopped you?" Jake. "I dunno. I'm afraid..." I managed, but even saying that word, *fear*, made the intensity of the moment lessen. I tried to get it back. "I don't know what will happen. It's big. I might lose my mind, or die." There, I had said it. I named the guardian fears on either side of the doorway, both to do with ultimate loss of self.

With that, the opportunity began to fade. To get it back, I went from person to person, talking right to them. "Do you feel it?" I would ask. When we connected, the air seemed to lighten and the promise of paradise hinted again. Jarot had the least patience for me, though we did briefly link. "I don't feel anything," he said looking away. Setcha and I linked right away as she looked at me and listened to my words, but the link had some sharp edges and she broke it off immediately. Obviously, the strain of my imposition on her person by the fire was still with her, and understandably so. I talked to Jake, and his eyes widened as he felt the connection that wasn't just between the two of us: the world seemed to be looking in on us. "Watch," I said, and turned away and the world immediately turned away too. "Do you see?" "Wow," he said (an expletive heard often in those days). Perhaps at that point, I needed more energy, another source. There was nowhere to go with this, I soon realized, and walked out into the forest again, which, itself, seemed about to awaken. The feeling faded, and soon I was left just walking and thinking about it.

Days went by in stonerville with an oyster-bake consisting of oysters stolen from a nearby farm and an incident when we all showered in private campground and I had to pay off the irate owner to prevent him from calling the RCMP. Bill and Jay arrived back from U.S.A. (the country whose draft they were dodging) with a kilo of marijuana wedged between their radiator and the grill, as well a "surprise for the weekend". We had already lost track of when weekends were, but in a couple of days they told us in whispered tones that they had "purple microdot acid, man. One thousand micrograms of lysergic acid dia-something or other in each hit¹. First thing tomorrow." Setcha and the chicks the Americans brought immediately began to plan dinner, as though tomorrow was some sort of special gathering, like a hoedown.

Attainment

"Attainment" is all wrong, for what happened on the trip was not really *attained*, that is, it is not an event that took place along the timeline of daily events. It is not my achievement, for it had little to do with my sense of self at all. *Awakening* might be better term, and awakening is not part of the dream narrative from which one awakens. It is the end of the dream, just as it brings this narrative to a sudden stop

This is where the story ends. Up to this point, I have been telling a condensed tale, with varied settings and characters, and, hopefully, with something of a suspenseful

¹ The microgam (μg) levels were never confirmed, of course, but 1000 μg is *very* high. See the Erowid site http://www.erowid.org/chemicals/lsd/lsd_dose.shtml, in which anything over 400 μg is *heavy*.

plot. However, here the narrator exits so the narrative must be left hanging. For how can I go on when I, myself – this writer, this narrator, this teller of tales, this self – was superseded by his own source? I can say, *time stood still*, but what can that really mean in narrative since narrative is made of time as we know it? Both time and narrative have a beginning, middle, and end, and both contain events that cause further events and so on creating a linear unfolding as time progresses. Words will simply fall short (as others in this issue have several times stated), yet I must make an attempt with the poor metaphors of language to suggest my awakening from the dream of the language-enclosed self.

We each took what looked like a purple Sen-Sen (licorice candy seeds), and the guys went outside to a shady spot at the edge of the evergreen forest overlooking the Strait below while the girls stayed around the cabins. We chatted, kept busy, but, really, *waited*. Eventually, “O wow” things began to be noticed or claimed, but the *weird things happening* were just events of the imagination, and I knew it. I settled into a spot with a view. I thought a bit but then my thoughts went utterly silent. Everything within was still, but instead of ascending or awakening I began a descent. I didn’t notice it at first; I just felt heavy, drawn into the earth “What a thin shell is the ground,” I thought vaguely, and the fragility of the surface presented itself to me. Irrationally, I began to feel I was about to break through the ground and fall helplessly into the depths. I held tightly to my spot, imagining the surface was already wrinkling and cracking. I began to shake, just holding on. This went on for quite some time without anybody noticing. My terror slowly subsided and was replaced by utter abjection, a deep feeling of hopelessness crept upward into my brain. I heard a whispered couplet from a disembodied voice, “Drifting shadows desert the night, bringing darkness to the light,” and felt dead inside.

Jake appeared, “What’s happening, man?” “I think I’ve lost my soul,” I heard myself say. “That’s not good,” he said, putting his hand on his chin somewhere beneath his thick black beard. He squatted down beside me, saying, “You can’t just give up. There’s got to be some way...” His words drifted off and we remained in silence while in the distance Bill and Jarot talked of American submarines that were said to have entered these waters. “There’s no hope for me,” I said, and in that context it seemed to make perfect sense. “But I’ll go on. I might as well live for others.” “Live for others,” Jake repeated thoughtfully then suddenly looked up.

A bird cried. Jake, who never moved quickly, stood bolt upright with his index finger pointing up. I didn’t know what he was doing as he walked quickly out of our shady spot and up a nearby hillock into the sunlight. He beckoned me, the darkness dissipated, and I felt the tingling all around me begin again. I *ran* up that hillock, I ran into the light, and then everything, literally, happened at once.

Remember, this did not take time, yet there was enough of me the observer present to recall that the tingling sparkles of light, like tiny sparks – more felt than seen – formed an invisible whirlpool right over my head. I felt, not *myself*, but my life energy, being pulled up into it. I tried to think, to comprehend, to warn myself, but

the thoughts entered the inverted whirlpool until they were spinning too fast for me to catch. My thoughts transformed from concepts into feelings (for that's what they really were) and every feeling spun itself around a core to which it was attached, like the ribbons around a maypole wrapping themselves into extinction. It was too overwhelming, too powerful and happened too fast for me to resist. Those *feelings* returning to core awareness, I know today, were the essence of my self-identity — all the conditioned inhibitions as well the elements of vanity on which ego thrived. In an instant the thoughts that were feelings were pulled back into core *being*, and psychic energy reached such a point of intensity that in a jarring spasm of release I, the consciousness that was me, was jerked *out of my head*.

This was sudden, this was dramatic, and it was definitely what Wolfson (2011, in this issue, p. 982) calls the *Transformational Transcendent Singular Event* (TTSE). Later when trying to write about it, I called, in the dramatic lingo of the times, "The Cosmic Hammer." As you can see, it is impossible to describe. I can only say that, for once, or for the first time in a long, long time, I burst free of the interior isolation of selfhood. My senses awoke – and perhaps other senses of which I had been only subliminally aware – and, with an orgasmic thud, my being ecstatically escaped from my skull. At once, everything was alit and alive. It was the most extraordinary and possibly the most wonderful moment of life. I saw Jake and his eyes, too, were shining with joy. But one second later, the training of social life intervened.

Jake and I recognized each other and in joy we opened our arms and stepped toward each other for a soul embrace. But, Jake, a shy young man in ordinary life, suddenly froze. He looked at me in shock before we could even touch. "I can't do it," he said, pulling back. "What?" "I can't... *What does it mean?*" he asked. The words sounded distant and hollow to me, and they did not seem to matter. The wind tore across me and I remained ecstatic. "What does what mean? What are you afraid of?" I asked. "You know what I'm afraid of," he said. I clearly saw his inhibitions, but they seemed so foolish. "Of what, *love?*" Jake looked hopeful for a second then his face fell, "What kind of love?" he asked and his face fell. "What does it matter? We're here!" I cried. I could see he was afraid that hugging another man in such a state implied homosexuality, but all such terms meant nothing to me at moment. "It doesn't matter what it means!" I said and went spinning around to see the 360° panorama of the light, the wildflowers, and the forest around us. Jake wilted: "But ... I don't want that." I couldn't wait for him and began to wander off, but, in retrospect, there a slight diminishment to the intensity, but the wind blew through a bush full of quivering blossoms and called me away.

I cannot describe the next hour or two, or however long we measure eternity, but I simply wandered about part of everything around me. This is not a metaphor: I felt myself merging with everything I observed in any sense or all senses. Corny as it sounds, butterflies paused near me, and birds kept singing even as I approached. I *was* those butterflies, I *was* that singing bird, and I *was* the bramble bush that took such pleasure (a pleasure I shared) in scratching my calves as I went by. Especially memorable was the wind. It blew with laughter wherever I looked and then blew

right through me, through my body. Today I still have no doubt: The wind was alive and playing with me, guiding me, though I realize that such a statement will cause a derisive smirk from the skeptical. I did not *do* anything during that period. Nothing crossed my mind, in general, though I did have one clear thought: *I am not going to forget this. I know in the future my own mind will cast doubt on this experience, but I am going to resist. I will keep this moment alive.* And so I have.

According to an expert in mysticism, Ken Wilber (2001, etc.), I experienced a lower level of mystical experience, the sense of atonement (at-one-ment) or unity with Nature, which is found to be alive and responsive. I really don't know about this, but I have been something of a pantheist ever since, even though I sometimes need reminding. The whole thing is not an object of knowledge to me, just a turning point.

At some point, Jake found me. His brow was creased and he had apparently been thinking furiously for the past hour. "So what about death?" he asked me out of the blue. "What about it?" I said, "It's nothing." "What? What?" he asked, seemingly unable to grasp the meaning of my words. I had nothing to say, it's true, but we soon discovered it was as though I suddenly spoke another language. Before I got to the end of the sentence, he interrupted because he could not follow me. Our rapport was broken and, at this point, communication was impossible.

We walked back down the path to the cabins and were met by Setcha. I saw and felt a warm glow of affection rise in me. "Hi," she said, and I took her hand. She was pleased and as natural as could be we walked hand-in-hand while she talked something about the cabbage rolls being ready. Once we got there I found I wouldn't know what an appetite was if it was explained to me. I could not eat. I did, however, take great pleasure in every person I saw. I knew them. I loved them. I identified with them. There was nothing else. My mind was still silent, but I found that certain people began talking to me and could not stop themselves, as though there was just something they had they had to get through or some wound they had to reveal. It happened several times, sometimes taking only minutes for the speaker to be satisfied. I uttered hardly a word. Later, though, after dark, Setcha began a long, long talk about her dissatisfaction or frustration with something or other but could not quite get to the point. Bill sighed from the shadows, "You're just afraid to be a woman." "No," she snapped, then added, "Well, maybe." She left.

Jake appeared again, even more haggard than before. He had a big revelation to tell me: "I'm a virgin," he whispered hoarsely, as though his secret might unhinge the masses. "That's why I didn't trust myself." It got confusing after that. I ran into Jarot and we had nice heart-to-heart. I was surprised to feel the heavy sadness he carried within him. He smiled with pleasure and only a little confusion when I told him that I loved him and understood. We went back to our cabin. Later, Setcha and Jake came in all bedraggled. We later learned Jake had told his terrible secret to Setcha, so they had found a place in the woods and managed, with some difficulty, to do something about it.

The Return

Perhaps I should call this penultimate section, *The Revenge of Ego*, for that is inevitably what occurred and continued for several years. Reintegration into society and my social self turned out to be disintegration. It is not pleasant tale.

It took time for the objective self (the ego-self) to reveal its antagonism, but soon everything changed for me. I returned to university that fall and, driven by a need I did not have before, began to take philosophy courses, eventually changing my major. I – the culturally constructed self that says “I” – needed to deal with what had happened. On the bright side, I sought explanations in literature, philosophy, and sometimes in other people. I began my lifelong journey into learning. I found no answers in philosophy, of course, but did learn how to ask better questions. Something wonderful had been revealed to me, and I wanted to learn how it fit in my life, and perhaps how to return to that state. I did not realize that thought cannot think passed itself. “No one can jump over his own shadow,” as the enigmatic Heidegger (1987, p. 199) expressed it. I am still trying, however.

On the dark side, I began to feel self-conscious in a whole new way. Since I have claimed all human consciousness is self-consciousness, I suppose I became self-conscious of my self-consciousness. I felt different from others. All their chatter and concerns suddenly seemed so mundane to me. I had no interest in partying, except to escape. Most strangely, I began to feel uncomfortable smoking marijuana. Unlike before, around others I watched myself, and pot just made the consciousness of self more debilitating. Alone when I smoked, thoughts arose that did not seem to come from me. I don't mean they were *voices*; I just found myself dwelling darkly that now I was changed, unlike anyone else, perhaps I was crazy, and how could I love *everyone*? I found when I talked, stoned or sober, that most people did not understand me. Not that much has changed, but now I sometimes get to finish my sentences and take a thought to its completion, like I'm doing right here.

The proud young man I had been was gone. In his place was nervous guy who spent most his time reading or looking into himself. My posture even changed. I felt, to say it outright, *guilty*.

I began to abandon my friendships, preferring to vegetate in the basement of my mother's apartment in which I lived. Ellen stuck by me and, in many ways, held me together. I became less interested in sex but she understood. I tried to explain to her what was happening, and, though her response was incomprehension, it was also compassionate. In this period, I grew manic. I could no longer sleep at night. The thoughts would come and grind on beyond my control. They most often used the pronoun “I” but if was me thinking, how come I could not shut them off at will? I accused myself of weakness in coming back to society, and I accused myself of insanity that I ever dared to transgress its constraints. I worried that maybe, in ignoring Jake's fears of sexuality, I had in fact accepted what he feared. I had my own life as evidence to the contrary, but ego accused nonetheless. I wondered about

returning to the *state of nature* that I had experienced, and sometimes I wondered if death was the only way back. The thoughts were like an ingrown hair that continued to work itself deeper. The only way I could manage them was to think thoughts of my own, that is, think the thoughts inspired by philosophic or literary discussion or to write a creative academic paper. Philosophy, mad as it is, was my one respite from madness, but thinking in any form would not let me sleep.

There were physical repercussions, too, and I refer to more than sunken physique and general nervousness. My arms and ankles began to itch and I scratched at them furiously, thinking the little purple lesions might be pustules. Eventually both my forearms were covered with scabs, as were my ankles. The doctor misdiagnosed me and sent to a dermatologist who, after some research, discovered I had lichen planus, a non-communicable itchy inflammation with cause and cure both unknown, apparently related to a mistake of the immune system. I still have it, but it is now under control with corticosteroids. Was this self-loathing?

Exhausted and feeling that I was about to go over the edge, I finally got my doctor to make me an appointment with a psychiatrist. My sensible side was very much against doing this. It meant going to the establishment for help with something that began by escaping the establishment and, it seemed, much of enculturation. "Once they get their hands on you, they won't let you go," a troubled young man with experience in such things had once told me. It turned out he was exactly right, but what else could I do?

My first session with Dr. Irlam lasted all of 15 minutes, since he had an appointment at the hospital. I told him I could not stop thinking and he asked me if I was hearing voices. "No," I said, "not voices. But it's not like me thinking them. They won't stop." "Do they accuse you or belittle you?" I admitted they did. He briefly explained that the brain is a complex piece of electrical machinery. Sometimes wires get crossed and things in the mind go haywire, too. When I asked why the wires get crossed, he admitted he did not know, but he assured me they had the pharmaceuticals and, if need, the *medical interventions*, to straighten things out. I admit I was somewhat relieved to hear this explanation and that I could be fixed so easily. He wrote me prescription for some sort of antipsychotic drug that came in a very big pill and told me take about five every day, and that I should "expect to be sleepy, at first." Sleep sounded soooo good. When I left after my 15 minute diagnosis, I asked him what they called what I had. "Schizophrenia," he said, and rushed out passed me.

To make a dreary story short, the drugs, whatever they were worked wonderfully for sleep. I slept all through the night; in fact, I began to sleep all the time. I nodded off in class. I found isolated lounges on campus where I could go completely out. People walked around me unconcerned. There were a lot of layabouts in those days. However, whenever I tried stopping the pills, the sleeplessness came back. I got so tired it's amazing I kept up with my schoolwork at all. If I took a drink of alcohol, I would nod off. I was caught in a trap.

By the next summer, after two years in university, Dr. Irlam, who occasionally talked to me just to make conversation, decided my therapy was not progressing fast enough and he recommended electroshock therapy. I would not agree, but my father and one of my *mature* friends thought it would be a good idea. Ellen did not know what to think but did want me back as I was before. It involved spending ten days in the hospital psyche ward and receiving the treatment once a day while I was under total anesthesia. I resisted but I had no will. I was assured it was not like the electroconvulsive therapy depicted in the movies, but a much more gentle current. In short, I went through it, making friends with a quite few girls who doing group therapy for “suicidal impulses”, everyone one of them an abandoned young mother. I found my sense of humour appeared again and I made them feel good about things. The therapist encouraged me to keep coming after my 10 days was up. Ellen and I even managed to make out behind the white curtains around my bed once. Jarot and I drank wine in the chapel and laughed about life. Each time they administered the knockout anesthesia, I would crack a joke and try, unsuccessfully, to get a rise out of the anesthesiologist while I went under.

I'll never know whether the daze I was in for the next several years came from my dis-integrated self or from the medical treatment I was given for it. I know that today I have very vague recollections of my childhood years compared to other people, but I cannot know if there were any other repercussions. In my final year of university, I continued on the antipsychotic drugs and was sleepy all the time. I took a compressed course load, so I could complete my degree, but I never could have managed if Ellen had not read chapters aloud to me then used the shorthand she was taking in business school to record my dictated essays that I would later type up into presentable form. Part of the bachelor's degree I finally got should have gone to her. In any case, I graduated, worked part time in the local brewery then at the end of the summer took off for Europe with Jake and another pal. Before leaving, Ellen pressured me for the engagement ring I had promised her, but, when the time came, that is, when we were actually standing outside the jewelry store, I found I could not go through it. There was no one in my life at the time to whom I owed so much, but I knew that by buying that ring I was committing myself to the sort of life everyone else seemed to be living, but, dozy as I was, I knew there was still some great mystery out there for me to pursue. So, in an attempt to rediscover selflessness in what was perhaps the most selfish act of my life, I refused to buy the ring and in a week had left for the post-baccalaureate European tour. (Hate me, if you must, dear reader. Writing this I feel I deserve it.)

The trip for the three of us was a bust. I was a drag on everyone, so, in Düsseldorf, Germany, the three of us went separate ways. One guy went to Spain, Jake to East Germany, and me toward Greece. I ran out of my antipsychotics somewhere hitchhiking through Austria, continued to sleep well, and have never used them again. In Greece, my land of dreams since reading Greek mythology in grade seven, I experienced something of a hard-won renaissance. I spent a year there, mostly failing at everything I attempted, but, eventually, I learned to socialize again. I had trouble relating to old friends once I returned to Canada, so I left for Edmonton,

Alberta's capital. Strangely, Setcha and I took up with each other and went through a short, disastrous marriage. I never much bothered with marijuana or psychedelics again, though other recreational pharmaceutical held temporary appeal for me when I was younger. But, by then, I was on my career path, such as it was, confined to teaching (I have no other skills), first in high schools then in universities. The irony never escapes me: How can I teach when I still have so very much to learn?

Aftermath

No, this is not one of Joseph Campbell's stages on the journey of hero. The hero's journey ended for me long ago, and I am no longer the hero of this life story. This is me looking back on a life that was unfolding in vigorous but predictable ways until it was inalterably changed by a series of events that took me to a profound awakening. I am unable to forget it and don't wish to, but I have long ago *moved on*, as they say. I am now living the two lessons I learned from the crash of the cosmic hammer that broke me temporarily free from my self-prison.

One is that the world and everything in it is alive, though our interaction with it has by now mostly been relegated to the unconscious. The other is that the ego is a prison. We need the self to negotiate through this world, but to be egocentric is the greatest sin against life we can commit. The self, i.e., self-consciousness, can be decentered and we can be aware, at least some of the time, from the primordial core that we really are, and which is more *of the world* than of our selves or even of our culture. If you said I was an animist, I'd say, fine, okay by me. Whatever might be ultimate reality, it is not out there (beyond this world), or in here (say, in string theory or quantum gravity), or in the source or origins (now in the past), or in the future (cultural utopianism or the afterlife). It's right here, right now. The barrier is consciousness itself, and I see consciousness as self-consciousness, constructed and imposed by the symbolic interaction of cultural systems. Of course, without learning intersubjective selfhood, we would still be animals, not good, but still is sometimes devoutly to be wished.

I never could quite accept the absolute finality of cultural difference found in postmodernism since I see the same light in others, no matter who they were. In fact, the light and life is not just in people — it permeates the boundary between self and other, period. *I am thou*, and thou art *everything* I can sense as well as the whole panorama of forces I can only intuit. I *know* we mainly live in a dream, probably our necessary conditioning, and that there is another awakening possible. I had the sense during those magic hours that I had awakened the dream; the experience was, to use a clichéd phrase that occurred to me then, a dream come true (very different than being awake within a dream). It was reality and I knew I had awakened from the dream of self in the same way we awaken in the morning and know we are no longer asleep. Now, in the mornings, I feel the weight of self come upon me with the first blinking of my mind; sometimes I remember that there is another awakening beyond that enclosure, except that it is not "there" but *here, now, always*. For the

time being, however, I must follow the dictates of my socialized self, slip into my habit routines, and *get things done*.

There are many things in our cultural world (our lived reality) that dictate against awakening beyond self to discover that one is a living aspect of an interrelating living world. Jung called transcending the self *awakening to the Self*, a new centre of awareness that is really our original centre; as the doorway to the collective unconscious, surely Jung capitalized Self to avoid using the more connotative word *soul*. It's a nice word, almost forbidden, and that adds to its attraction. Note that we awaken (or can awaken) to soul, not *me to my soul* or *you to your soul*. Soul is the soul of the world, the *anima mundi* that church authorities in previous times tried to obliterate by burning to death those who swore by it. But denial of the world soul goes very far back into prehistory, I believe, back to when shamans or prophets became priests and kings to dictate exactly how the sacred would be dealt with. Awareness in the moment amongst untamed forces held its peril. Fear and insecurity turned us into followers. To make us feel safe from life, we believed in the power of those who led us. To make us feel safe from death, we developed formalized belief systems that promised eternal reward for obedience. To make us believe that we loved and were loved, we became faithful patriots and parents. Anyone who wanted more was a danger to the community and an apostate.

I feel we are most truly in touch with soul when we transcend our daily selves, and that may occur in moments of crisis, during intensely creative action, or, perhaps most importantly, when love overwhelms common sense. We cannot culturally avoid moments of crisis but we are constantly training ourselves to quickly and effectively contain them, so whatever awareness the moment of crisis has released is quickly dissipated. Creative action we seem to encourage, but every culture has developed ways to guide those impulses down socially acceptable channels. Love, however — not romantic love but the unhindered energy of universal love that I felt sear through me like that animated wind — has been most effectively repressed and transmogrified by the forces of cultural domestication. Aside from the containment in family, tribal, or national groups mentioned above, we have developed organized religion and a whole culture of caregivers and charities both of which offer sanctimonious substitutes for the transcendence of real love. But the most effective counter to the life force of love within us has been the constructed self, the individual ego, that confines us within acceptable attitudes and supplies us with cultivated roles that in subtle ways specify generic appropriateness. If one dares transgress such roles, one had better have the ready support group or at least the mindful conceptualizations at hand to help soul to re-integrate itself. The use of LSD may have rushed me through to Reality when I was not yet ready to deal with it. As Roland Cichowski wrote in this issue:

Such a forced breaking of the veil, though, often leaves the experiencer shattered and in some ways dysfunctional if the mental thought patterns that might allow you to accept such a revelation have not had cause to develop, and are not in place. Even when they are partially there, as may have been

the case with me, you can fear for your sanity as I did. It is not for nothing that the spiritual traditions that use drugs require the guidance of an experienced shaman or guide. (2011, p. 976)

Clearly, in my youth, I did not know how to live with what I had found or, perhaps, who I had found I was. I can call what happened the revenge of ego, but, given time I might have learned to embrace such awareness and become integrated with it. I do not deny it today, but I am unable to return to it. I am an exile every second of my life. I can blame myself but, since I must live, I generally live with gusto. Some of the blame, however, must go to my social system or culture.

Peace and love are wonderful to live, but they have by now become social embarrassments to discuss in public. It has been a long time since the generational movement of peace and love collapsed or became transmogrified into the indulgences of the “me generation”. In retrospect, it seems that many women did not want to be truly liberated from their social roles and that many men were unwilling to embrace either peace or love since they felt them to be somehow effeminate. In short, we fear unbridled love as an inexcusable weakness. Even toward the end of my fateful trip, I wondered whether I dared live with the absolute love I felt while listening intently yet with an incredibly open mind to the needs of others. As I neared sleep, I concluded that such an open heart would almost certainly lead to martyrdom. Bleeding hearts are killed, I thought vaguely, and remembered with comfort my previous life. Later, on the shallow emotional level of the self, I was simply afraid that what I had discovered was dangerous to my sanity, perhaps even to my concept of masculinity, and certainly to any success I might wish for in life. Of course, back then in my “return” I had twisted everything backwards. Today I know: *The walls of ego are made of fear.*

Yet my long return to functioning selfhood has left its mark, as well. Compensation is probably the most easily understandable psychological function of consciousness. I am probably regarded as stubbornly macho. I keep my tender heart mostly hidden and, even though I’m just passed 60, I still lift weights, can be aggressive to anyone who is aggressive to me or threatening to others, I still appreciate female beauty more than I should, and I sometimes catch myself swearing like a seaman — none of which are behaviours commonly seen in socially acceptable university professors.

Self-transcendence is very real — more real than the moment I write this and you read it — and, as indicated by the Zen master, D.T. Suzuki (1964), such transcendence takes back *into* the world, not beyond it. It is indeed the “discovery or the excavation of a long lost treasure” (p. 179). However, there is a price to be paid for this treasure, and it is the price of the self we each believe we are. Before we find ourselves amidst the light of the anima mundi, we have to enter a dark night of the soul. Our assumptions about nature, world, love, and being may have to die before we can be reborn, that is, reawakened to being. For me, this is the dream that needs to come true for all humanity, for all life, and it is not impossible that it is destiny.

In a Dark Time

A steady storm of correspondences!

A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,
And in broad day the midnight come again!
a man goes far to find out what he is—
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,
All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

(Theodore Roethke, 1964)

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