

## MAPPING THE COURSES OF HEAVENLY BODIES: THE VARIETIES OF TRANSCENDENT SEXUAL EXPERIENCE

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*ABSTRACT:* The relationship between sex and spirituality is a controversial topic in transpersonal psychology. This article presents a phenomenological inquiry into the nature of nonordinary, transcendent experiences reported during sex. Based on the results of 86 interviews with heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual men and women ranging in age from 26 to 70, this study focused on spontaneously occurring experiences in individuals who had no prior history of tantric or other "spiritual" sexual practices. A phenomenological cartography is presented, based on the taxonomy developed by Grof (1975,1988) and illustrated with numerous vignettes derived from the reports of the participants in this study. In conclusion, a vision of sex is considered that goes beyond more and better orgasms to genuine transcendence and integrated, embodied spirituality.

One of the most controversial pairings in transpersonal studies is the relationship between sex and spirituality. Sex is an inborn drive to unite with something outside ourselves, foreshadowing the notion of the transpersonal (identifying with something beyond the personal). In addition to the drive to merge physically with another, human beings seek a psychological unification. Metaphorically and literally, male-female sexual unions have parallels in virtually all spiritual systems, ranging from the interplay of the sexes in indigenous religions to creation stories from around the world, such as that of Shiva and Shakti, to male and female principles, such as yin and yang, to Shekinah and Sophia as divine female counterparts to the masculine god in esoteric Judaism and Christianity to the love poems of mystics in the ecstatic traditions, particularly Sufism.'

Furthermore, orgasm is, at least for a moment, a transcendence of the usual confines of time and space when the kernel of the self bursts open. There is a grain of truth in saying, "It was a religious experience," when referring to a particularly intense climax. Sex represents one of the most accessible roads to ecstatic experience, so it is hardly surprising that it is a path many people have found, whether their spiritual tradition recognizes, regulates, or forbids it.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps its very accessibility and highly personal quality, which bypass the intervention of ideology, authorities, and mediators, account for some of its troubled history in the annals of religion.

The fact is, whether spiritual traditions sanction sex positively or negatively in relation to the sacred, the ubiquity of nonordinary experiences during lovemaking

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cannot be denied-nor can the inclination of persons who have such experiences to connect such events with spirituality. Researchers of spiritual experiences invariably seem to uncover their link with sex in a majority of cases, often to their own surprise (e.g., Laski, 1961; Maslow, 1987). In addition, sex researchers publish records of spiritual breakthroughs and conversions, even among atheists (e.g., Maurer, 1994; Scantling & Browder, 1993). Thus, events that people consider to be sacred happen fairly regularly through an act that (a) many have been taught by secular as well as religious authorities to be profane, or even shameful, and (b) under circumstances that may be forbidden, or even "sinful" (e.g., in extramarital or homosexual relations). Outside of Taoism, Tantra, Judaism, and other religions that may teach techniques deliberately designed to bring about altered states during sex (but that also regulate acceptable practices and results), a fair number of people (perhaps 1 in 20, as suggested by Scantling and Browder's study) seem to have spontaneous, involuntary, nonordinary experiences while making love, regardless of their own beliefs and the mores of their societies. What happens to them, and how do they understand their experiences?

Despite the institutionalization of sacred sex in some religions and its documented recrudescence among the uninitiated, no one has attempted to study these states systematically as they occur in the absence of direction or bias provided by a particular ideology or technical instruction. This article, which describes part of an ongoing research project, represents the first report on the phenomenology and variety of transcendent sexual experiences as they occur naturally in a "naive" (i.e., untrained) population.

#### RESEARCHMETHOD

For a phenomenological inquiry into the nature of nonordinary sexual experience, the overall plan was to recruit a sufficient number of highly articulate participants who could describe extremely subtle, probably virtually ineffable, subjective events. Since the range of experiences was unknown, however, there was no preconception of how many individuals would be adequate for this kind of survey. Men and women of any sexual preference, marital status, and ethnicity over the age of 21 were eligible, provided they had not had training in Tantra, Taoist sexual techniques, or similar erotic arts designed to bring about altered states and/or create an ideology or expectation that might shape either the state itself or its interpretation.

Owing to the private and sensitive nature of the subject matter, recruiting was limited to personal and professional contacts and word of mouth. Although this introduced considerable bias, it seemed infinitely preferable to advertising through print and electronic media for two reasons: (a) in the initial stages of the research, it might be difficult to spot hoaxes or fantasies and (b) to screen out responses from people whose sexual interests would be at variance with the intent of the study. Recruiting took the form of e-mail solicitations through professional and personal networks, mentions of the study at lectures given in various institutions of higher learning, and referrals from these sources. Solicitations invited anyone who had had a "nonordinary, mystical, or transcendent experience during sex with a partner," or who knew someone who had, to participate. Anyone who self-selected based on that vague description was initially accepted. Only those who were using

psychotropic substances at the time of the events in question were eliminated to minimize the artifacts of other altered-state triggers.

Recruiting qualified people was not particularly difficult, despite the minimal wording. People who said they had never had "transcendent" sex, whatever they imagined it might be, were absolutely certain. The momentary loss of self, time, and space during orgasm is so familiar that people seem to identify this sensation as "ordinary." A powerful orgasm may jokingly be a "religious experience," but people seem to classify even the most exquisite climax differently from an experience of transcendence. In fact, one researcher who compared powerful altered states he had had Cosmic consciousness," psychedelic experiences, and "the best orgasm of my life" [Smith & Tart, 1998, p. 104] said definitely that the orgasms to which he was referring were "rather ordinary and certainly not 'mystical'" (A. L. Smith, personal communication, March, 1998). Thus, these stories come from self-identified volunteers with their own understanding of "nonordinary, transcendent, mystical experiences" during sex, discussed below.

The following report is based on the results of 86 interviews with heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual men and women ranging in age from 26 to 70. A surprisingly large number for a qualitative study, especially a phenomenological one, this sample was necessary once the full range of experiences began to emerge. Since the thrust of this article is a phenomenological cartography, no attempt will be made to provide a quantitative analysis of the results or detailed demographic data. However, some general qualification of the sample is offered to indicate its limitations. It is not representative of American adults demographically for the reasons stated; nor is statistical validity a goal in this project. Furthermore, no attempt has been made to include representatives of the full range of spiritual practices and beliefs, or of the full range of sexual proclivities and experience.

The sample consisted of 50 (58%) women and 36 (42%) men. The majority (77%) were heterosexual in their preference for partners (35 [41%] women; 31 [36%] men), followed by homosexual (16%: 10 [12%] women; 4 [4%] men), and bisexual (7%: 5 [6%] women; 1 [1%] man). Marital status was not a useful category for various reasons: (a) individuals were sometimes speaking of past events unrelated to their present marital status; (b) if married, they were sometimes speaking of extramarital events; (c) those with long, rich histories had had experiences while single, married, divorced, or outside of marriage; and (d) for same-sex connections, marital status was not necessarily a relevant descriptor.

The sample was predominantly White (88%). Other groups represented 12% of the total: 4 (5%) African-Americans, 4 (5%) Latinos, 1 (1%) Asian, and 1 (1%) Native American, respectively. Owing to the solicitation venues—mostly through universities and contacts in higher education—the sample was highly skewed toward people with advanced degrees: 24 (28%) had doctoral degrees (Ph.D., M.D., J.D.); 34 (40%) had masters degrees; 5 (6%) had some graduate education; 18 (21%) had bachelors degrees; 2 (2%) had associates degrees; and 3 (3%) had high school diplomas.

Concerning spiritual beliefs that might have a bearing on the subjective interpretation of nonordinary states, people were asked about the traditions in which they had been

reared and their present religious orientations. Forty participants (47%) had been brought up in households identified with various Protestant denominations; 21 (24%) were Roman Catholic; 16 (18%) were agnostic or atheist; 7 (8%) were Jewish; and 1 (1%) was Buddhist and 1 (1%) was "eclectic." As adults, the vast majority have shifted their spiritual orientation—some as a direct result of their sexual experiences—though the reverse did not seem to be true: they noted little, if any, crossover from a spiritual practice, such as meditation, and the types of experiences they had during sex (a full discussion of these findings is beyond the scope of this paper). At present, most follow less traditional paths: 40 (46%) considered themselves "eclectic" in their orientation; 13 (15%) atheist/agnostic; 10 (12%) "generally Christian" or a specified Protestant denomination; 8 (9%) Buddhist; 4 (5%) Roman Catholic; 4 (5%) Yogic/Hindu; 3 (4%) Pagan/Nature mysticism; and 1 (1%) each Islam, "Jewish mysticism," "New Age," and Transcendental Meditation. (Interestingly, of the 13 who said that they were now atheists/agnostics, 6 used theistic references throughout their records in describing the events and meaning of their sexual experience.)

Respondents were interviewed in a mutually agreed-upon location, or, if this was inconvenient, by telephone. The interviews were semistructured and took anywhere from 30 minutes to 2 1/2 hours. They consisted of standard open-ended questions, followed by additional probes to develop promising lines of inquiry and to clarify. A few preferred to write about their experiences, and in those instances, the same questions and probes were used in a dialogical correspondence.

How adequate is this sample? As already noted, the intent was exploratory and the selection deliberately skewed. This is an ongoing study, and it is possible that there are experiences outside those represented here, but the degree of overlap among 86 cases suggests that this is at least an adequate first attempt to chart new territory. How trustworthy is the information? People may exaggerate or fantasize about their sex lives or avoid telling the entire story. A further difficulty exists when the events in question involve an altered state, which may be difficult to capture and convey in an ordinary state. This is complicated by the difficulty inherent in communicating phenomenological information verbally (e.g., describing the quality and nature of an orgasm). Furthermore, the accounts represent the self-reported version of a subjective experience uncorroborated by anyone else. Even in the few cases where both partners agreed to be interviewed, their own experiences frequently differed significantly from each other.

It would be difficult indeed to make any claims for the data if any single experience had to stand on its own. But, just as with near-death experiences, when person after person describes the same type of event, the same feelings, and the same insights, patterns begin to emerge. Each story is a data point; the more there are, the clearer the image. The patterns they produce may not form the sharp delineation of representational art, but they can give the softer, more layered images of impressionism. The emergent images are as meaningful and clear as those of Monet, van Gogh, or Seurat. Although only 86 people were interviewed, their stories represent more than 86 events. For some, a transcendent experience was a rare happening in a lifetime of sexual activity. Like any other profound spiritual event, such as a near-death experience, these one- or two-time occurrences were reported with great vividness from memories of times and partners often long past, sometimes as much as 30 years ago.

For many others, however, transcendent sex occurred with some regularity in a particular relationship, often covering two or three different types of experience over time. A fortunate few commonly have transcendent experiences whenever they make love and wonder why anyone would "bother" to have ordinary sex. They sometimes had a range of experiences to report. The net result is that no category mentioned below represents a single case.

### *Defining a Transcendent Sexual Experience*

Owing to the variety, no simple definition of transcendent sex is possible. However, two factors consistently emerge from the narratives as characteristic of transcendent sex. The first, not surprisingly, is participation in an altered state that could not be ascribed to the use of chemicals or deliberate techniques. In these states, as illustrated below, the ordinary sense of time, space, and/or agency (in Cartesian-Newtonian or Formal Operations terms) is transcended. Furthermore, the altered state includes an awareness of the lover, if only as a conduit, and is rooted in the union of the two during sex. These altered states appear to be more or less independent of orgasm, which is considered a discrete state of its own. That was invariably true for the men: they entered an altered state that had no relationship to the timing or duration of their climax. It was true for the majority of the women, as well. For a few, however, being non- or mono-orgasmic during sex is either infrequent or impossible. These women were having an unending chain of orgasms that could last indefinitely, usually until their lovers withdrew the contact, although the events they described as transcendent had little or no (subjectively) discernible relationship to orgasm. (For most men and women in this sample, orgasm was either a nonevent or a problem relative to the transcendent sexual state. Some could not recall whether they had had one, as they were so much more drawn into other events; some said it became "irrelevant"; others found it a somewhat irritating distraction; and a couple found that orgasm shattered or ended the state.)

The second factor that differentiates transcendent from ordinary sex is the felt experience of a cosmic force engaging one or both lovers in the context of their relationship, especially their lovemaking. This cosmic force is most often described in the terms reserved for Spirit: God, the Divine, the Oversoul, the Void, etc. Some described it spatially, as a place they can enter, a world of cosmic power, intelligence, and love. For some, the force is implied: It is the invisible source of their journeys into other realms, or it makes the other realms possible. For others, it is a living entity that somehow arises from, but cannot be reduced to, the union of the lovers. The tendency to associate such experiences with the supernatural was marked, frequently resulting in deep personal transformation, spiritual insights, and even conversion.' Indeed, the interplay of both these factors-i-altered states and the felt sense of the numinous-creates a variety of sexual experiences that appear to have the same characteristics as those recognized in some of the major spiritual traditions.

### *The Varieties of Transcendent Sexual Experience*

Classification of complex human experiences is fraught with difficulties, as any taxonomy is somewhat arbitrary and can never reflect the dynamics or richness of

an individual's experience per se. Rather than create a taxonomy specifically for this project, it seemed wise to determine whether an extant model would serve. The one chosen was developed by Grof (1975, 1988); it was selected for several reasons. First, he originally created a comprehensive cartography of transpersonal states arising from a variety of sources: his psychedelic research, holotropic breathwork, and experience working with individuals having spontaneous episodes of nonordinary states. It generally is congruent with perennial philosophy, although it contains more categories and differs in some details. Moreover, Grof has also frequently acknowledged the relationship between sex and various nonordinary states in his writings (e.g., 1975, 1985, 1988, 1998). His schema was also chosen for reasons of brevity (Rhea White's [1995] *Exceptional Human Experiences* classification is magnificent, but with more than 200 categories, it would not be easily reproducible in this venue. As it is, Grof's addition of a third grouping labeled "Intentional Psychokinesis" is omitted because it involves the "ability to influence the material environment ... by simply wishing events to happen" [1988, p. 157], a category at variance with the involuntary, spontaneous nature of experiences sought for this study).

Grof's model does indeed cover the kinds of episodes arising during sex. What follows, then, is a brief recapitulation of Grof's complete taxonomy (1988, pp. 42-157), indicating where these sexual experiences fall and giving examples but also showing what types of experience have not (yet) been found to arise from sexual activity under the conditions noted above.

Regrettably, in the brief space of this article, it is not possible to develop any of these cases fully outside the condensed content presented here for classification. The full records are luminous with joy, peace, discovery, insight, and inspiration, and they have typically been life-changing events. However, only such quotes as illustrate the phenomena for classification can be given here. Nevertheless, it is hoped that at least a tiny bit of the radiant bliss will shine through.'

### *Transpersonal Experiences*

#### *Experiential Extension Within Consensus Reality and Space-Time*

##### *1. Transcendence of Spatial Boundaries*

*a. Experience of Dual Unity-Loosening* and melting of the boundaries of the body ego and a sense of merging with another person into a state of unity and oneness.'

Perhaps the most common of transpersonal sexual experiences is the sense of the two lovers' merging into one being. Respondents report not only a strong sense of psychological and spiritual union, but physical, as well, including, as seen in the second example, the sharing of kundalini. These are accompanied by profound feelings of sacredness and love, also noted by Grof with other subjects and relationships (1975).

Then, any sense of separateness between us dissolved. I couldn't even tell whether I was making love to her or being made love to. I can hardly even tell you what our physical

bodies were doing because it was like our bodies were part of the flow and ebb of all this energy and Spirit body. We were all mixed together in this mysterious, melting dance. Body awareness merged with all the other levels.... We were one moving, touching mass of energy and awareness, not two separate poles of consciousness .... I sort of felt like a woman and a man ... where all we were was one being, one love, kind of a melting together. (Kyle)

Often ... my partner will start to feel the energy in her pelvis, and it goes in shock waves up her spine. She'll begin to have kriyas, ... and my body will react. I'll feel it almost like my spine is a radar dish or something. Her spine is sending out this wave, and my spine catches it and responds .... And sometimes vice versa. (Nanette)

*b. Identification with Other Persons (None.)*

*c. Group Identification and Group Consciousness-Expansion* of consciousness to a global awareness of an entire group of people by race, nationality, cultural heritage, religions, profession, shared ideology, or destiny.

Some women identify with all women's experience, and in so doing, find their femininity affirmed, making them expand more into that part of themselves and feel more empowered.

They feel like they're very, very close, all women. Not an identity, but *all women*. My identity falls away, and I'm identified with all women now and back in time, and their state of mind. There's not a separation .... My way of being a woman is so much greater from having had this experience. I grew up Catholic ... with the body being sinful and touching it being sinful. . . . A sense of rapture that came from so many different places, and how wonderful it was to have that ... and that sense of unity [with all women]. (Kristin)

*d. Identification with Animals-Complete* and quite realistic identification with members of various species.

Animal identification in this group may not be well-matched with Grof's because his examples display an abstruse knowledge such as might be ordinarily be known only to biologists or animal specialists. Sex respondents report more feeling states than an unusual knowledge of actual animal behavior or attributes. The potential degree for cultural determination appears to be high in this sample, but perhaps also in this category of experience, given the reports of various indigenous groups to identify with culturally significant organisms, such as grubs, salamanders, vultures, spiders, scorpions, ants, snakes, frogs, weasels, baboons, rats, and coyotes, while this North American sample mentions only predators-usually mammals (wolves, bears, and the big cats), but also birds of prey. These most puissant animals in modern-day North America, however, are often the ones associated with shamans, who are among the most powerful individuals in their societies (Eliade, 1951; Kalweit, 1988; Walsh, 1990; Wolf, 1991). Metamorphosis into animals during lovemaking typically involves aggressive, rough sex play, which, along with the above, may suggest fantasy. Participant perception, however, is that of being overtaken (possession), confusing the causal link between sex play and the shift. Increased

strength, bestial mannerisms-growling, snarling, scratching, biting, fighting, or wrestling-and the altered-state sense of actually being and thinking like an animal manifest in ways quite contrary to subjects' everyday personalities and sex play.

With that [electrical charge] comes a power and a strength that makes me feel invincible, like [I] could run through the woods and jump over trees any time now.... It's that kind of strength. If I'm the wolf, my hips and butt and legs, especially the tops of my legs where the quadriceps are, feel different. Definitely leaner, sinewy-God, I wish I were sinewy!-kind of like a haunch sort of a musculature so you could spring. When I'm a wolf, it seems easier to move and jump about, and when I'm a bear, it doesn't. As the bear, I feel the weight of the head, really, really big, and very, very heavy. (Kim)

*e. Identification with Plants and Botanical Processes* (None)

*f. Oneness with Life and All Creation-Identifying* with the totality of life on this planet, including all humankind, flora and fauna (extending to viruses and single-celled organisms).

A number of individuals report an opening of self to identify with all creatures.

There's a connection with the universe that happens. I sense a connection with the flora and fauna, all the other animals [and people] in the world. The experience has more of a horizontal plane to it, the immanent reality. But with the sense of oneness and connection, certainly. It's a different plane, closer to the ground, about union with all living creatures. . . . We're really connected, all of us with each other for all time and all space. And there's a sense of "how vast the universe!" (Terry)

*g. Experience of Inanimate Matter and Inorganic Processes-Identification* with macroscopic and microscopic phenomena of inorganic nature (e.g., consciousness of fire, the ocean, iron, and quartz).

Rarely do individuals go into the microcosm during sex; but when they do they see and become part of the interplay of energy and matter.

It's almost like a biologist or physicist looking at subatomic particles or things under the electron microscope, the basic patterns of energy that the universe is made of: forms of waves and rays and points and the interplay of expansion and contraction, progressions, and the experience of densities. I'm having all kinds of visions and insights, the kind I imagine physicists have, where there's the confluence of energy and matter, the regeneration of life and death. (Donna)

*h. Planetary Consciousness* (None)

*i. Extraterrestrial Experiences-Travel* within this solar system, and to other stars, and galaxies; witnessing explosions of supernovas, contraction of stars or identifying with these entities and events.

A number of people (mostly women) journey blissfully through outer space, flying along in the darkness surrounded by stars and planets.



And then again I felt myself in the cosmos, but this time it felt like in the solar system with solid planets and gaseous planets being present and around me. I seemed to be in outer space. There was a lot of space between what was out there, blackness with points of lights, stars.... There seemed to be a presence of other planets too, and I was floating. (Vivian)

We were among the stars. It was black, and there were all these stars, and it was like we were flying, both of us flying. It was mostly a visual impression, but it was accompanied by that feeling of incredible openness and joy. I was just incredibly happy. It was very much a feeling of being my true self, being who I really am, authentic. (Jill)

*j. Identification with the Entire Physical Universe (None)*

*k. Psychic Phenomena Involving Transcendence of Space (out-of-body experiences, traveling clairvoyance and clairaudience, and telepathy)-Leaving the body; moving to another place in the physical world; occasionally moving to experiential realms and subjective realities that appear to be entirely independent of material reality; reading the minds of other persons.*

Out-of-body experiences are common. Usually the experience involves moving to a place suspended above the lovers and looking down at them in the here-and-now (very similar to OBEs reported under other conditions, though in this case usually accompanied by feelings of great peace and wonder.)"

I suddenly found myself having for the first time what I would call a transcendent kind of experience. I was out of my body observing me and my lover lying in bed from above, perhaps near the ceiling. I'd never heard of such a thing and didn't know how to explain it, but it was a very strange phenomenon suddenly looking down at the two of us. (Dick)

Along the other dimensions of spatial plasticity Grof includes in this category, some (mostly women) report being transported to different urban and pastoral locations, but most often under the sea. This transportation is typically accompanied by ecstatic feelings.

There was a time when we were like dolphins in the water. I saw other fish in the water, but I was more aware of us.... The water was very blue, and it was extraordinarily peaceful, joyful. (Jill)

**In** a striking case of telepathy, a man making love with his date at a party became aware that his best friend, who was attending the same celebration, needed help.

I went into an emptiness, and in that emptiness an awareness came to me that Tom was in danger. ... And it was such truth that I knew he was in danger.... So I immediately came back into my body. I said, "Oh my God, oh my God. Something's wrong with Tom."

She said, "No, there's not. He's still at the reception. He's having a great time.... "

I started running down the street throwing on my clothes.... As soon as I turn the corner, there's this mob of people. In the center of it was Tom and this huge Hell's Angels

type of guy brawling with him. Without hesitation-and I'm just a little guy-I lunged. I just jumped on this guy's back, trying to get him in a headlock. He was a huge, huge fellow.... This *guy* could *have* taken me *out* with his thumb, if he had wanted to, but I just had this tremendous energy.... That evening, Tom said, "You should really be hurting." And I should have been because that was a brick wall [the attacker] threw me against, several times. I was not bruised or in any kind of physical pain out of the experience, during it or afterward. (Esteban)

## 2. *Transcendence of the Boundaries of Linear Time*

### a. *Embryonal and Fetal Experiences* (None)

b. *Ancestral Experiences*-Historical regression along biological lines to periods preceding the subject's conception and an identification with one's own ancestors.

Some respondents *feel* transferred back in *time* into *the* bodies and personalities of their forebears, which usually is something of a shock. For example, one woman found herself as a Celtic priestess during the Roman conquest of Europe.

I was there during the time when the Roman empire was invading Gaul ... I have this sense that I died in a Roman prison. Some of the most excruciating pain I've ever experienced was a vision that I had right after we'd made love, this feeling that they were burning my trees, burning my groves. (Ardrigh)

At the time the incident occurred, she knew nothing consciously about ancient Celtic culture, nor about her own ancestry, but her identification with these events was so strong, she decided to check into her origins.

I didn't even know the names of my great-grandparents ... I did the research later. I found out that the groves were sacred in the Druid tradition. They actually worshipped in groves of trees, and that's why I was just so upset that my trees were burning. I've tried to verify some of the other stuff as actual historical occurrences, and of course, the Roman empire eventually overtook Gaul up almost into Ireland.... But when I get in that guise, I can speak Gaelic fairly well, and I don't even know Gaelic. It's the damndest thing. [My lover] has written down some of the stuff I said ... and it's old, old Gaelic. We've actually looked it up. (Ardrigh)

No claims are made here for the veridicality of such events, but their felt validity is sufficiently strong that most other participants spoke of conducting similar research or experiencing uncanny manifestations and synchronicities in conjunction with these past-life episodes.

In another example, a White man whose mother had always been troubled and fascinated by fair-skinned African-Americans who could almost "pass" for Whites found himself as the Creole mistress of a White plantation owner who later married a Black man.

I had six children in that life, Three of them passed for White because their father was a planter, a White planter. One of them, one of the children who passed for White, is my

mother in this lifetime, She was my son in that lifetime. The person who is now my mother left New Orleans and came to Minneapolis and passed as White in that lifetime. In this life, she also went from New Orleans and Tennessee to Minneapolis, (Richard)

*c. Racial and Collective Experiences* (None)

*d. Past Incarnation Experiences-Participation* in episodes occurring at another time and place in history. The person maintains ego-identity, while experiencing the self in another form at another place and time.

Persons report past-life experiences without any sense of their biological lineage. These events frequently mimic those of past-life regression therapy in revealing (sometimes foretelling) fundamental conflicts that are not apparent to the lovers at the present time. In one, a couple on their second date relived a history of several years' duration in which they met, fell in love, had an illicit affair, created an unintended pregnancy, lost the child, and split up in Victorian times. The story was particularly disturbing as they were just falling in love and had no belief whatsoever in reincarnation or other "nonscientific" phenomena. They married and were together for a long time, but by the time of the interview, they were separating.

The story was dictating to us, like watching a movie, and you don't get to change it if you don't like what's going on. It was playing out, and we were being shown something .... I didn't see any similarity in it with us at that time, though it did say something about why we felt so compelled to be together even though we didn't know each other that well; why we felt so familiar, like we'd always been together. It was overriding my logical mind, which was a big override for me. The rational part of me dismissed it I'd say to myself, "Oh, you were just daydreaming." I believe we were given an opportunity to be with each other in a different context, but we haven't been able to do it. We made the wrong choices again in this lifetime, It's too painful to continue. (Carolyn)

Unique among the sexual experiences, only those involving past lives in some way seem to place both partners in a shared altered state. Respondents usually describe this as "finishing each other's sentences" or "like we both had the same movie going in our heads, but we weren't making it up."

*e. Phylogenetic Experiences* (None)

*f Experiences of Planetary Evolution* (None)

*g. Cosmogenetic Experiences* (None)

*h. Psychic Phenomena Involving Transcendence of Time-Psi* phenomena including precognition, clairvoyance, and clairaudience of past and future events; psychometry (obtaining history or information from touching an object); time travels.

Some respondents reported instances of precognition. Like the past-life experiences, future insights seem to involve negative outcomes, although the feelings associated with them tend to be peace and calm acceptance. For example, one woman who was

resuming with great hope a relationship that had been suspended for a number of years, suddenly saw the future.

I felt that we were lifted into levels of possibility, of unfettering connection, though perhaps not yet realized, which existed at some level still to be reached. I was thoroughly confident that the path was there even though I was perhaps on it alone. The feeling was of liberation . . . being freed . . . a sense of opening to another unknown dimension of experience. . . . [In this one transcendent moment.] it was as though I was lifted into a dimension of truth beyond ordinary rational understanding, wherein I knew it to be the realm of false hope. The disjunction of this overwhelming feeling and the uncertainty of what I knew to be the more likely outcome of our association was not at all upsetting. There was a refreshing calm that settled over and stayed with me for days. (Leah)

3. *Physical Introversion and Narrowing of Consciousness-Organ*, tissue and cellular consciousness.

Cellular awareness tends to be reported in two ways, one of which is not necessarily congruent with Grof's definition in that it involves a sense of the "aliveness" of individual cells owing to an unusually charged sense of the entire body during sex.

It was an experience of being both completely and totally aware of every cell in my body-and of every cell in my body vibrating at the same frequency-and yet not even inhabiting my body at exactly the same time. (Betty)

The second type of experience seems to draw the individual down into the cellular or molecular microcosm.

It's as if I dove into your eyeballs, and I got into the interstitial spaces and into the vitreous humor and started to push my arms and legs out to make everything wider. And all of a sudden you feel that you operate from a very contracted place, relatively. Muscles relax where you normally don't even know that they're there because, at the time, you thought they were part of an immovable structure. Now I can lean back, now I can stretch out and feel limber and really unfurl. (Sabu)

*Experiential Extension Beyond Consensus Reality and Space-Time?*

a. *Spiritistic and Mediumistic Experiences-Mediumistic* and channeling experiences, in which the individual's countenance, gestures, and voice are dramatically changed. Sometimes the individuals perceive a discarnate entity, but they may also be taken over by an alien entity or energy form.

Perceiving other entities happens more often during sex than the sense of being changed into one (except for animals, noted above). Called "shapeshifting" or "merphing" by participants, these occurrences normally involve the rapid succession of a number of different faces superimposed on the partner's actual visage (*trespassoy*.

At least half a dozen times. I've had an experience with my eyes open where I'd see my lover's face morph into all these different faces. [There] might be 20 different faces. I

don't remember them all, but some are more memorable than others, so I'd recognize them when they came up again. (Vivian)

Other experiences include the sense of physical manifestation, and could involve not only physiological changes, but movement, such as gestures and glossolalia.

When she steps into that place, she gets rougher sexually. There's a rawness. She even smells different. And she said my eyes seemed a lot darker when I looked up. I have light hazel eyes, and she said they were so dark it was almost like black eyes. Her sense was that they weren't my eyes at all. (Lynn)

We would spontaneously start speaking in tongues, and at first I felt kind of embarrassed about that, like "What is this?" ... Either he would start speaking in tongues, or I would, and when that started happening, it was another signal that this wave of energy is coming over us, through the different movements of my tongue or different hand gestures, perhaps mudras, (Leona)

*b. Energetic Phenomena of the Subtle Body-Experience* of various energy fields described in mystical traditions of ancient and non-Western origin (e.g., kundalini).

As might be expected, kundalini effects are well represented. They typically involve unusual percepts of light, heat, energy, and liquification, and they seem to behave in the same ways described in the Tantric literature, with which very few of these subjects had even a passing familiarity (one couple was upset by an episode of amrita).

I'm aware of energy, patterns, and electric colors... When it moves past certain areas of the body, the body will tend to get kind of tingly. It's like there's pure crackling, surging, grinding, burning energy. Boundaries tend to expand, and ... the further the energy goes up the spine, it seems like the more intense it gets, and I start getting into an altered state, (Reginald)

The light was just going through me ... and shooting out of the top of my head. I had feelings of white lights shooting out of the top of my head.... You think of sunlight or lightning, but nothing like *this!* ... I started crying because it was overwhelming, an emotional effect like "Oh, my God, I'm coming home. I got home." A feeling that I'd been separated for a long time, like coming together, and finally being home, (Suzette)

*c. Experiences of Animal Spirits* (None)

*d. Encounters with Spirit Guides and Suprahuman Beings-Interactions* with spirit guides, teachers, protectors, and beings of light.

During sex, people may have visions of supranatural beings (e.g., angels and pre-deceased loved ones). In some cases they feel themselves or their partners manifesting divine forms (e.g., their Ideal Form in a platonic sense). More commonly, they sense an ephemeral Third presence or divine entity that is cocreated with and by the lovers, yet also independent of them.

I had a little sister who died when I was 10 and she was 6. And I felt her presence in the room right then.... When I was growing up, she was really close to God because she was

dying the whole time she was growing up. I felt her close to the divine Presence, as if she came from God. So as an adult, whenever I had an altered state-well, not whenever but sometimes when I've had them-I would see her.... I didn't have a sense of myself as being just me, but of a divine Presence being around. (Armand)

Sometimes when we make love, I see my lover's face grow young, and she looks 20 years old to me. She has that radiant, lit-up-from-within beauty, almost as if she is divine herself in a way, as if she becomes a perfect version of herself. It's like looking at images in a church, or icons that can be suggestive of something beyond themselves. There's something transcendent even in the vision of her, like Whengreat art gives rise to religious feeling. When she transforms before my eyes, I've been displaced to a different environment where everything has become radiant because *she's* my environment. I'm going into a holy place. (Blake)

I've always had a sense of movement beyond myself. I have no illusions that my partner and I are creating that. ... I haven't come to a good term for that. Some of the native peoples call it the Great Mysterious.... By our coming together maybe there's something that we're doing that is the kindling in the midst of that fire, but that fire comes from somewhere else, not just from the two of us.... Making love is a way to go to church, talk to God, connect with God, however you might understand that. (Roland)

*e. Visits to Other Universes and Meetings with their Inhabitants (None)*

*f. Experiences of Mythological and Fairy-Tale Sequences (None)*

*g. Experiences of Specific Blissful and Wrathful Deities-Experiences* with deities associated with the forces of light and good or darkness and evil.

Somewhat rare, these experiences concern deities associated with archetypal forms (e.g., Sappho and Kali). The majority of these deities are ambiguous in their presentation, such as Kali, whose fierceness is as much relished as feared.

I beheld this dark man, fairly shadowy, I really couldn't come up with any features other than a rack of antlers.... It was Carnanuss, ... the [Celtic] lord of the forest and the hunt [who symbolizes to me] the seduction into the wilderness, the betrayal of that trust and murder. I think that's the degree of anxiety I have around this figure.... My Catholic background said it was the devil, but it was Carnanuss, (Zebediah)

All of a sudden, I heard this horrible roar ... and a serpent came out of the water, the rainbow serpent, and he dived back in and I could never quite see its head but I could see its body where it came in and out and in and out. It was frightful and beautiful, shimmering, very bright. (Natasha)

*h. Experiences of Universal Archetypes (None)*

*i. Intuitive Understanding of Universal Symbols (None)*

*j. Creative Inspiration and the Promethean Impulse (None)*

*k. Experience of the Demlurg [sic] and Insights into Cosmic Creation (None)*

*l. Experience of Cosmic Consciousness-Identifying* with the supreme and ultimate principle that represents all Being characterized by formless, dimensionless, infinite awareness, knowledge, and bliss.

Participants describe unitive experiences in the same language of the *unio mystica* of Western contemplative traditions, especially omniscience and overwhelming joy.

It's a very boundariless time, and then comes the Light, mostly a flood of bright, whitish-yellowish light ... *It's* as though the *Light* were all the universe that's not me, the part of the universe that I don't think I'm usually connected to. That Light definitely represents the life force, the universal force, the god force without the deity.... I'm content in the Light because I'm also there observing it. I love it when this happens, but there is that moment when it begins, and I step in it without that awareness. It is maybe nondual for a few seconds, and then I'm there observing it, so it's not there. (Esther)

It's *real!* ... At the same time I felt it coming from the outside, it was also coming from the inside. It was evident that it was also in me. I participate in divinity in a direct, inclusive way. There's no separation at all. All those mystical incantations about the entire universe being embedded in the person, or that the soul of the human being participates in that, it was all suddenly manifest. ... Was there a face to God? No. Or a presence? *The presence was us.* It wasn't a call, it wasn't a sign. All the things I had interpreted as it weren't true. We were just there. It just *was.* Oh, yes, it's real. I become all of me but with my ego or subpersonalities all gone. Just God is left, and I am that. (Zebediah)

*m. The Supracosmic and Metacosmic Void-Experience* of primordial emptiness, nothingness and silence; the Void that is supraordinated to and underlying the phenomenal world.

Several describe nontheistic nonduality in terms very like those of Buddhism, though it is hard to do them justice in a short excerpt.

I sensed that I had gone some place, and that once I came out of it, I knew I had been there, but not when it happened. You know how there's the being in something, and then the knowing that you were there. So when you come out of just being and you get to the knowing part, you're an observer apart from what comes in that moment. Everything was dropping away, no sensory perception, and there is no way to describe it. There was nothing but union in that moment, but I couldn't tell you union with what. And immediately afterward were the tears, tears of joy, incredible joy that I felt the privilege of having this incredible gratitude and awe. (Marta)

There was nothing there. The boundaries of the body *went.* and yet there Was an awareness of doing, so there was an awareness of action, but the sense of the body was not. There was this dissolvingness, and this losing of boundaries. And then there was this incredible nothingness and everythingness, Out of this feeling of nothingness and no-self, there was yet all possibility and all potentiality. It was probably for only an instant, but in that instant there was no time and no space.... Yet there was somehow an awareness of what was happening, an awareness of something and nothing all at the same time.... There was just a more complete sense of really pure awareness, just no sense of self. The completeness of the nothingness was enormous. (Ann)

## *Transpersonal Experiences of Psychoid Nature*

*1. Synchronistic Links Between Consciousness and* connections linking various types of transpersonal experiences to physical events in the phenomenal world, especially the meaningful coincidences of events separated in time and/or space.

Grof recognizes a number of phenomena in this general category that include experiences people report during sex, especially unusual connections between their actions and natural forces. As Grof notes, these are clearly subjective intrapsychic events, but they are also meaningfully connected with specific physical changes in consensus reality (1988, p. 148). Subjects in this study speak of both meaningful and magical synchronicities. A few think, for example, that their lovemaking creates a "bubble" in time.

We must have made love in our customers' houses hundreds and hundreds of times. We always did it at our own pace, never hurried.... It was the right thing to do in that moment, and in that moment, our sex ran the world. Once we started, we were completely safe. It was as though, somehow, through our strong desire to make love and our freedom from embarrassment, we were never caught. With this particular man, our love was so confident and sure it seemed that the universe honored the magic in us ... but feeling as though the whole world is in me, and I'm the whole world. And it worked. We were never caught, ever.... It amazed me that it was only just as we were putting ourselves back together that the customers came back. Never before. (Francine)

Others have a sense of participating in the forces of nature.

Our caressing and touching was slow and languorous, and we were moving very slowly together. There was a real sense of connectedness to each other. We were looking into each other's eyes a lot, and I started feeling as if our boundaries were melting .... We had an orgasm together, which was lovely, really lovely. We were both kind of trembling in that moment. And then the bed started to shake. And then the whole room started to vibrate. So right at the moment that we were having this intense climactic, orgasmic experience, suddenly the whole world was shaking. There was an earthquake! (Roland)

## *2. Spontaneous Psychoid Events*

*a. Supernormal Physical Feats-Spectacular* physiological changes in the body or seemingly impossible achievements (e.g., stigmata and luminosity of the body of various saints).

See the above description of unusual physical engagement in an unequal fight without physical injury (Esteban's narrative in *l.k. Psychic Phenomena Involving Transcendence of Space*). According to Esteban, he threw himself on the back of a much larger man who was attacking his friend, attempting a headlock. Although Esteban notes above that he suffered no injuries, he was not, in this instance, supplied with superhuman strength:

It was kind of comical in that [the attacker] just picked me up, plucked me off his neck and threw me against the [brick] wall. That should have hurt me, probably should have



broken some bones. But I immediately got up and lunged at him again. In fact, I lunged at him about four or five times, I was obviously not in my right mind. All I knew was that I had to protect Tom, and yet Tom is bigger than I am, He's got a lot better chance than I do of taking care of himself. (Esteban)

*b. Spiritistic Phenomena and Physical Mediumship* (None)

*c. Recurrent Spontaneous Psychokinesis (Poltergeist)* (None)

*d. Unidentified Flying Objects (UFO Phenomena)* (None)

#### CONCLUSIONS

Based on these findings, the numerous vague allusions in the literature to nonordinary experiences occurring during sex appear to represent an astonishing array of altered and transpersonal states. Many of these are consonant with the experiences described in the spiritual literatures of various traditions, including the far-travelling and otherworldly episodes of indigenous religions and those associated with various stages of contemplative practice in the esoteric and perennial systems. Although another classification scheme would yield different results, this one allows for the extensive range of phenomena and tends to point to clusterings around experiences of higher-order entities and organisms, connectedness, terrestrial and organic (as opposed to inorganic) processes, and archetypal imagery. Thus, sex appears conducive to an unusually broad range of experiences in which agency, temporality, and space are different from the consensus reality.

Probably owing to the recruiting method, the majority of these experiences were positive, so positive, in fact, as to be ecstatic. These results can hardly be viewed independently from their context, even though not all of the sexual relationships were happy ones. Where negative emotions were either present or foreshadowed, they still seemed to be productive of valid realization and insights and thus were positively valued by the subjects. (Destabilization of ego boundaries as a consequence of transpersonal experiences is reported in this sample, but the experiences themselves were still quite positive.)

At this point, it seems clear that naturally occurring sex can be just as effective as other processes in bringing about altered and transpersonal states, including those vaunted by traditions that highly regulate and repress bodily desires. Since these naive subjects were not deliberately attempting to bring about the events, and since their spiritual beliefs were usually at variance with any expectation of a "religious experience" during sex, they were not especially helpful informants concerning causal factors. Several reasons suggest themselves, however.

To the extent that altered states are associated with changes in brain electrochemistry, they can be generated by many factors, such as lack of nourishment or sleep, sensory deprivation or overload, repetitive sounds or motions, drugs, contemplation, etc. Sex often involves a number of these—especially repetitive motion, sensory overload, and a concentrated focus similar to meditation—not to mention the

changes in body and brain chemistries as hormones are released into the bloodstream. Of course, some individuals are more inclined to be somatically attuned or swept into states of absorption. Other factors suggest that relaxation, letting go of all physical effort, and becoming highly concentrated in the present contribute as well. (A fun treatment of these factors is outside the scope of this paper.)

The fact that sex can take people to the same realms as trance, meditation, drugs, etc. may well support the notion that the phenomenal worlds of human experience fall into certain universal patterns, as has often been suggested by materialists and transpersonalists alike. No matter what the trigger, there are only so many "destinations." Realizing that sex can transport uninitiated and disbelieving people to so many of these points, though, is powerful, new knowledge that can potentially benefit many. Transpersonal psychologists are well positioned to use such knowledge effectively.

For instance, just making this information public would open a discourse with those who are now shamed and silent. One of the saddest findings has been learning that with rare exceptions, subjects had never told another person—not even their partners—about their experiences prior to the interview for fear of being considered crazy. Just as in the early days of near-death research when people were afraid to tell about what happened to them, they expected ridicule—and often had to struggle alone trying to make sense of events that severely undermined their belief systems. Many also knew their partners were unsympathetic to "spiritual stuff." So it was easier to suffer profound experiences alone than bring them out into the open, effectively creating more distance in the relationship regardless of the positive nature of the experience itself.

Finding a spiritual outlet for discourse was also difficult. As the results indicate, few people's traditions value nonordinary experiences, and many—perhaps most—overtly discourage any thought of the convergence of sex and the sacred. Even for those who left mainstream practices, few found their experiences honored in recognized contemplative traditions and instead have developed their own idiosyncratic, personal practice (as have others, such as near-death experiencers who have had profound spiritual experiences at variance with the dogma of recognized paths). Only a handful of people said they were willing to discuss their sexual experiences in spiritual venues.

Acceptance of this type of embodied spirituality seems rare, despite attempts by some feminists for greater acknowledgment of the body. Sex continues to have a troubled relationship with most spiritual traditions, but as an accessible medium for transpersonal experiences, greater awareness could foster discourse around its potential for transpersonal openings, personal transformation, and spiritual knowing. To the extent that sex is treated as a "lower" form, an unworthy desire, or a hazard to "true" spirituality, its potential will be repressed and its discoverers marginalized. These are not merely issues for some conventions, or for women, but for any approaches to spirituality in contemporary culture.

Certainly, sex is not the path for everyone (and thinking that it is, or should be, runs the risk of creating yet another hurdle for performance, however implicit). But it can

be recognized as a powerful method of transpersonal journeying. Knowing that it can lead to the same places and realizations that recognized spiritual paths do can open new areas of exploration. With a map of the territory, those who have been there can come out into the open, enjoying the affirmation of knowing that their experience is neither unique nor shameful and sharing their gifts with the larger community. Others can at least learn that there is a new world out there, a vision of sex that goes way beyond more and better orgasms, whether they wish to attempt to reach it or not. Just knowing how uplifting and inspirational sex can be may be helpful to those who have suffered sexual wounding and abuse in the past, including those who have been spiritually marginalized for their preference in partners. Indeed, the fact that there seems to be no difference between the ability of homo- and heterosexuals to undergo transpersonal experiences during sex could be extremely beneficial, especially for adolescents and others coming to terms with their sexual preference.

The potential for working with such embodied forms of spirituality is great. It sheds light on altered state experiences and triggers. It suggests that the body can be far more incorporated with spiritual practices than has hitherto been explored by most traditions. It can significantly reduce the shame associated with the body, sex, and particular ways of having sex, and certainly it can heal and transform. In short, knowing about transcendent sex can open new horizons in everyday living and loving.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> No slight is intended here concerning same-sex unions, as will be clear below. The above statement merely reflects the vast majority of the historical literature.

Sex and spirituality seemed more conjoined in ancient times. From what little is known of true indigenous cultures, distinctions were not originally made between sex and spirituality. In the established global religions today—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—esoteric and mainstream conventions may either embrace or reject sex as conducive to spirituality. It appears that the vast majority of forms deny the role of the body to some extent. Virtually all of them regulate sexual expression, even when it is considered a spiritual path, such as in Judaism and Vajrayana Buddhism. The history of sex and spirituality is beyond the scope of this article; for a brief overview, see Wade (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Preliminary findings on the transformative powers of these experiences have been reported in Wade (1998, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Slightly fuller records have been published previously (Wade, 1998, 2000), and complete ones will be forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> Category titles and descriptions derive, as noted, from Grof (1988, pp. 42-157), though most are paraphrased, since this version of Grof represents long prose descriptions of his more Concise 1975 version. Grof has expanded his cartography over the years, and continues to do so. Where the 1988 and 1975 versions still coincided closely, paraphrasing here is closer to his 1975 schema, owing to its conciseness.

<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, out of body experiences in this sample do not include the dissociations of sexually abused individuals; in fact, although the sample includes people who have been abused, they not only reported being present in their bodies during the events, but to have been healed to some degree or another by their embodied yet transcendent sexual encounters.

<sup>6</sup> Grof's outline format in terms of hierarchical organization of numbered and lettered categories is not consistent; nevertheless, this paper conforms to his system for consistency and ease of cross-referencing.

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