
This is a terrific book, an in-depth report on the transcendent experiences of 91 individuals in the course of sexual relations. This is not totally unknown. The studies of peak experiences by Abraham Maslow and of ecstatic states by Margarita Laski show that sex is one of the frequent triggers of mystical and non-ordinary states of consciousness. A dissertation by Del Sokol studied exceptional sexual states of individuals in the Adi Da spiritual community. (And the mystical erotic descriptions of several saints’ experiences have long been an embarrassment to some organized religions.)

Wade’s research maps these experiences more fully, and delineates an amazing range of extraordinary experiences including classical mystical unity (the most common grouping), spiritual realms, parapsychological perception, subtle energy, shifts in time and space, past life recall, and other non-ordinary phenomena. She compares the phenomenology with states described in the literature of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, yoga, shamanism, and other traditions.

Wade became interested in this topic from her own personal experience. She describes the occasion in which she was making love and the room began to change. “Its right angled white walls dissolved into a round, pink chamber with a silver Greek-key border around the ceiling.” Next she was looking out over sparkling ocean waves. Then she found herself in another room where the walls were covered with paintings of sea creatures, fish and octopi, painted in the distinctive style of Crete, a culture little known to her. “The greatest peace, wonder, delight, and bliss pervaded me” (p. 8). For her, this and subsequent experiences were transformative, but not exactly a contemplative practice that one reported in spiritual support groups. In fact, she found in this study that very few people told anyone about these extraordinary events, not even their partners. People did not seek these experiences, but they occurred spontaneously, without warning.

They might happen once in a life, or many times, but only for some did they lead to a spiritual practice or path. Ken Wilber, in the foreword, comments, “Sex might not be conducive to certain religious beliefs, but it is definitely conductive to religious experience” (p. ix, italics in original).

Wade gives ample direct quotes to show the nature of these extraordinary events:

“You’re just shot into the white light… .The white light is God…. .You know that everything separate is an illusion because you’re not separate from God….It’s God, Goddess, a-sexual, and yet it is also homey” (p. 180).

“And there was just this engulfing white Light. It could have lasted a minute, it could have lasted twelve hours. I don’t know….That was all I was aware of, and this incredible sense of compassion and love” (p. 193).
From an experience of merging: “Scott, Scott, Scott became me, me, me… I was one with Scott, not in love with him, but some kind of unquestioning, almost flat acceptance of this fusion” (p. 213, italics in original).

Unusual forces: “Either he would start speaking in tongues, or I would, and it was another signal that this wave of energy is coming over us” (p. 36).

Body energy: “The warmth and tingling starts in my toes, an electrical feeling that moves up my body and just goes out my eyes” (p. 30).

Inner colors: “I’m aware of energy, patterns, and electric colors, golden, white, or blue… . It’s like there’s pure crackling, surging, grinding, burning energy” (p. 30).

Though the book can be read by a popular audience, the research was guided by a phenomenological research design, with a thematic content analysis of the experiential reports. Wade gives details of the research for the scholarly audience. It is indexed and well referenced. The participants interviewed were well educated, self selecting, and diverse in terms of sexual orientations, religion, and gender, though mostly Caucasian. Age tended to be older than the general population: means were 41 for women and 46 for men. The opportunity is here for extending this inquiry to wider populations.

The results were remarkable in terms of what did not make a difference in the experiences. Transcendent states have little or nothing to do with sexual technique. Men and women have the same kinds of transcendent episodes. Orgasm is not a necessity. Sexual abuse is not a causal factor. Transcendent experience is not limited to profound relationships, true love, ethical behavior, or expectation. These states have no requirement for religious or spiritual beliefs. Wade does have suggestions for conditions that seem to facilitate, if not cause, these experiences. She discusses choosing a partner you trust, clearing your relationship, give yourselves time, have special preparation and places for sex, engage in sensuality and foreplay, extend the time, allow passivity, letting go of outcomes, and other recommendations.

One of the provocative findings of this book is the range of non-ordinary experiences that are reported. Some are classical mystical or peak experiences, but others forms are of extrasensory perception, out of body experiences, somatic reactions, other worldly vistas, and even encounters with visionary and non-human beings. Some of these experiences as such are not necessarily spiritual in the common sense of holy or sacred. For some of the experiencers they were, and for others they were simply wonderful experiences. The sacred quality may be more the result of individual and social interpretation rather than the presence of intrinsic spiritual meaning. This is a meta-issue which has not been addressed in transpersonal psychology. Most of Wade’s participants were well educated, and often came from audiences at her talks on this subject. If the respondents had been less knowledgeable about spiritual concepts, I wonder if they would have had so many positive feelings about the experiences. Being out of the body can be frightening, as can be unfamiliar shifts in inner and outer perception (and Wade includes a cautionary chapter on unpleasant reactions). Therapists and counselors might note in this regard the value of reassurance of normality for persons who have
unexpected and unnerving transcendent states, from sexuality or other evocative experiences.

My wife and I read this book aloud to each other during a period when she was recuperating from surgery. It was not erotic, despite its focus on sexuality, but moving and informative in its accounts of relationship, transcendence and journeys into inner realms of reality.

The Author

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