
In Embodied Spirituality in a Sacred World, Michael Washburn completes a work of art, applying the “finishing touches” to his theory of the spiral nature of human development. Washburn’s transpersonal, depth-psychological theory has been nearly thirty years in the making. In artful prose, he presents his expanded view of the role of the deep psyche—called the Dynamic Ground—in human development. Then, breaking new ground from earlier writing, he articulates an embodied spirituality fully grounded in the body and of the natural world. Earlier books, The Ego and the Dynamic Ground and Transpersonal Psychology in Psychoanalytic Perspective, emphasized Jungian, psychoanalytic, and object relations theory. This book incorporates contemporary research and theory on embodiment, somatic psychology, and ecopsychology, thereby reaching out not only to transpersonal psychologists but to developmental psychologists, scholars of spirituality and ecology, and spiritual practitioners.

For those familiar with Washburn’s earlier books, the first few chapters will seem a fast read. Washburn explores and updates his three stages of human development: the prepersonal, the personal, and the transpersonal. Up until about age five, in the prepersonal stage, children live in dynamic connection with the energies of the Dynamic Ground. From around age five through middle adulthood, the ego emerges to explore and negotiate the everyday world, relationships, and world of work and responsibility. In so doing, the connection with Dynamic Ground quiets and drops to the background of awareness. Yet, in the later life, some adults (presumably the fortunate) “spiral back to the deep psyche” in order to “spiral up to life lived in its fullness” (p. 2).

In the first chapter entitled “The Spiral Path: History and Criticism of the Idea,” Washburn reviews the controversy dubbed the “pre-trans fallacy” by Ken Wilber in a style that seems a bit embattled by Wilber’s repeated critiques. Washburn defends his position that the U-Turn toward the Dynamic Ground in later life is not a spiral of regression but a spiral toward transcendence and claims that Wilber makes a pre-trans error of his own by arguing that what is earliest is necessarily lowest or inferior. For Washburn, the numinous qualities of the Dynamic Ground must be integrated by the adult psyche in order to live fully embodied in the world, a theme repeated throughout the book. Washburn’s review of the back-and-forth controversy raised for me a very different issue. How might a transpersonal theorist engage in discourse, and serious debate, in a manner that is playful and sympathetic in style? From many feminist and multicultural perspectives, the style of discourse communicates as much as the content.

Washburn’s presentation of the spiral path of human development is systematic. In turn, he discusses a stage view of development, the role of the Dynamic Ground as
the reservoir of deepest level of the unconscious, the ego (the “self”) as the center of consciousness, relationships as a mirror for intrapsychic development throughout the lifespan, the body as the site of spiritual enactment, and the world as a life-world inner and outer. In particular, the chapters on energies of the Dynamic Ground and the awakening of energy in the body read as though Washburn has lived every moment described himself. Many of these descriptions feel unnecessarily heroic and even combative in tone. In the experience of many, awakening to Spirit does not follow such a dramatic course. Washburn could use a few gentler metaphors to describe the adult embrace of the deep psyche and kiss of Spirit in the body. But, Washburn writes:

In most accounts—whether mythological, spiritual, or psychological—the descent into the underworld or to the Dynamic Ground is not only a dangerous odyssey but also an essential stage for a longer journey. It is a dangerous odyssey because it poses the risk, variously conceived, of destruction, damnation, ensnarement, or psychosis (p. 55).

Washburn’s final chapter entitled “The World” is brilliant. The world we experience is a highly differentiated and ever-changing life-world. This life-world follows a spiral course throughout the lifespan, the stages as follows:

1) Ouroboric sphere of “unbounded sphere of immanence; everything is self, nothing other” for the newborn (p. 171).
2) A garden of delight at age four or five months in which “the child’s needs are immediately met, without effort on the child’s part” and caretakers are at least “good enough” (p. 171).
3) A spirit enchanted and haunted world after about age one and a half in which the child lives in a world haunted by “frightening glimpses of the vastness of the world” and reclaims paradise, in part, by living in a “world of make-believe” (p. 176).
4) The playground of youth in childhood divested of supernatural power but “safe enough” (p. 179).
5) The rehearsal stage of life in puberty and early adulthood.
6) Responsible action of early adulthood in which the ego identity is pursued and at which most people remain throughout their entire lives.
7) The “existential desert” in which the world feels “remote, arid, flat, and unreal” and identity is lost.
8) The reawakening of the Dynamic Ground that results in an exciting yet unstable life-world akin to flickering shafts of light in a dark forest.
9) The progressive integration of the dark and the light of Spirit until darkness lifts and the life-world is no longer dangerous or threatening.
10) The “joining of heaven and earth” in which the world is revealed as sacred and transparent.

In words as inspirational as they are precise, Washburn writes that this integrated world represents the end of the spiral path . . . [and] a return on a higher level to the ground from which the spiral path began . . . This integrated world is a world of exquisite beauty because, like the garden of delight, it is charged with plenipotent energy that, as an attracting energy, renders the world irresistibly inviting and that, as an amplifying energy intensifies perceptual qualities in pleasing ways . . . an energy that makes the world gleam with sparkling, gentle light (p. 194).
The Author

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Reviewer

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