EDITOR’S NOTE

Exploring the unknown via new or re-newed paths in order to better understand the human trajectory is often fraught with challenges. How appropriate or meaningful are our avenues of inquiry? How can we stay open to possibilities yet exercise scholarly acumen? All authors in this volume are aware of such issues yet invite us to think with them and dialogue about such matters. As always, we provide contact information for direct communication with authors and, as mentioned in earlier volumes, are open to creating a forum space for further inquiry, especially on articles that generate much dialogue and varying responses and perspectives.

Arthur Hastings, our book review editor, opens this issue of the Journal with a report of his ongoing and extended research on an assistive means (a restricted sensory environment called a psychomanteum booth) to ease the bereavement process and help healing from a loss, possibility facilitating the experience of after-death contacts with the deceased. Accounts of making contact with the deceased are reported in the research findings, as are statistically significant healing benefits (reduction in measures of bereavement). Such shifts, however, did not seem to always require presence of the deceased. Stressing the phenomenological (rather than purely objective) nature of such experiences, he urges the reader to think with him in further pursuing this terrain.

From Australia, Karl Hanes then accompanies us into the unfolding of a case of an unusual experience which he invites us to ponder. For this feat, embracing many forms of knowing may be called upon. Charles Tart, respected author and long-time editorial board member, in offering a postscript of his reflections and experience while reading the article, reminds the reader about the importance of honoring, studying, and evaluating what might challenge one’s sense of the ways things are … or supposed to be.

Moving on to Taiwan, William Stimson, a seasoned professional in the Ullman experiential dream group approach—having trained with its originator Montague Ullman—invites us in to observe the nuances of a dream work session from a transpersonal perspective. He focuses on a specific case in demonstrating the process—not only of the method but also of the revealed value and transformative potential of releasing healing energy for the group, or someone in the group, even, or perhaps particularly, when the dreamer might still struggle with the meaning.

Stateside, Steven Taylor, drawing from his own research as well as that of others, illuminates the nature of what he terms spontaneous awakening experiences—what many writers, he claims, would label spiritual experiences—a term he suggests be used sparingly, reserved for such experiences catalyzed or induced by spiritual practice. Psychological turmoil emerged as one of the most

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frequent triggers for such spontaneous awakenings in his research and that of others. He urges further inquiry on the wider context of life itself serving as catalyst.

As a final article, Joseph Ryan from the UK addresses the potential of art, specifically the art of photography, to foster spiritual growth and emphasizes the role that development of increasing awareness plays in that process. He calls upon and resurrects the voice and vision of Minor White as an exemplar, applicable to a new generation where many more are accessible to photography with the rise in use of digital cameras. The reader is invited into dialogue as well as debate about the potential not just of photography but many forms of art as avenues to spiritual growth, understanding non-duality both for self and society.

An array of book reviews are featured including Jawer and Micozzi’s The spiritual anatomy of emotion: How feelings link the brain, the body, and the sixth sense; Robert Augustus Master’s Spiritual bypassing: When spirituality disconnects us from what really matters; and Elliot Benjamin’s Modern religions: An experiential analysis and expose’. Also featured is a two-volume set by Etzel and Winkelman: Altering consciousness: Multidisciplinary perspectives. Volume 1: History, culture, and the humanities and Volume 2: Biological and psychological perspectives. Concluding the reviews are two of Michael Mayer’s books geared toward psychotherapy focused body-mind healing (Bodymind healing psychotherapy: Ancient pathways to modern health and Energy psychology: Self-healing practices for bodymind health). As this issue went to press, however, Mayer’s most recent book was published, one that he considers a culmination of all his work to date: The Path of the Reluctant Metaphysician: Stories and practices for troubled times. Watch for it.

As always, Books Our Editors are Reading section offers continuing resources and insights.

MB
Falls Church, VA USA
EFFECTS ON BEREAVEMENT USING A RESTRICTED SENSORY ENVIRONMENT (PSYCHOMANTEUM)

Arthur Hastings, Ph.D.
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ABSTRACT: This article reports research using a semi-structured bereavement protocol with 100 participants experiencing bereavement for the death of a family member, friend, pet, or other deceased individual. Apparent contacts similar to spontaneous after-death encounters were reported by 63% of the participants. Repeated measures of bereavement on 20 items (e.g., grief, longing, anger) were taken before the process, immediately after, and one month later. Reductions in feelings of bereavement were statistically significant. Decreases in bereavement correlated positively with increased tendencies toward absorption (Tellegen Absorption Scale, r = .38, p < .001). The 3–4 hour semi-structured process included writing, interviews, art work, and mirror gazing (a restricted sensory environment called a psychomanteum booth). Qualitative experiences included mental conversations, messages, questions and responses, memories, imagery, touch, physical sensations, odors, and emotional shifts. ADC, after-death communication, Attachment Theory, bereavement, Continuing Bonds, death, grief, hypnagogia, mirror gazing, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, psychomanteum, REST, Restricted Environmental Stimulation Technique, Tellegen Absorption Scale.

When a person dies, the feeling of loss is one of the most difficult of life experiences for family and friends who are left. The state of bereavement that results is often one of grief, sadness, and distress. Some bereavement states may be resolved in a few months or a year or two, while others may continue for decades. The purpose of this research was to determine if an experiential process could facilitate an experience similar to the spontaneous after death communication with a deceased person, which is often reported by surviving family members and friends, with an effect on levels of bereavement.

In such situations the feelings of loss may be punctuated by incidents in which a survivor may feel a sense of the presence of the person who has died. There may be a vivid dream in which the deceased appears. One may hear the voice of the lost loved one or have conversations with him or her. There may be spontaneous and unexpected visions or signs that seem to come from the deceased and which are experienced by family members, friends, and sometimes others. Far from being rare, these apparent communications after death occur to many people, and have been studied in medical and psychiatric research. Surveys and the study of apparent contacts have been conducted cross-culturally. An early study by Rees (1971) surveyed all the widows and widowers (n = 293) in Wales. Contacts with the deceased were reported by 50% of the widowers and 46% of the widows. Kalish and Reynolds (1973) surveyed four ethnic communities (African-American, Latino, Japanese-American, and Caucasian) in Los Angeles, with 44% claiming to have felt a post death
contact. The experiences of contacts have been reported in many countries and locales, including the U. K. (Bennett & Bennett, 2000), India (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977), Iceland (Haraldsson, 1988), the U.S. (Cleiren, 1993; Greeley, 1987; Klugman, 2006), and Japan (Yamamoto, Okonogi, Iwasaki, & Yoshimura, 1969).

Several studies have gathered data on the phenomenology of the experiences, and the effects on feelings of bereavement. In a random telephone survey ($n=202$) Klugman (2006) found the most common mode of contacts included dreams, sounds, feeling a presence, and having conversations. A sense of presence or contact may be reported in any of the sensory modes, in mental conversation, or somatic sensations (Klugman, 2006; Whitney, 1992). Whitney interviewed 24 individuals who experienced contacts. In the group there were 35 reports of positive feelings (happy, thankful, and blessed) and 17 reports of negative feelings (sad, scared, angry, and crazy); however, the majority of individuals who had negative feelings also had positive feelings. The significance of these contacts was studied by Kwilecki (2011) using an in-depth qualitative textual analysis of 25 published accounts of such contacts. She found that upon having a contact, the percipients felt immediate relief from the grief and the distress at the loss, and they created congruent meaning from the experience. In a study of 596 volunteer individuals who experienced contacts Arcangel (2005) reported that 98% felt they had received comfort from the encounter. Steffen and Coyle (2011) interviewed 12 participants and in a thematic analysis the central themes were feeling benefit in the continued existence of the person who had died, feeling positive about the relationship, and finding meaning, whether existential, spiritual or religious.

In addition to spontaneous occurrences of communication with a deceased person, there are traditions of facilitation in which there is an attempt to evoke the communication. Some of these practices go back to prehistory and early historical times. In ancient Greece there were practices that were intended to evoke contacts with deceased individuals as well as gods and spirit beings (Ustinova, 2011). Such practices often involved elaborate ritual procedures that could produce altered states (Hastings, 1991), and that were possibly enhanced by psychoactive substances. A description of one practice taking several days included “secluded lodging in a small building, cold baths, prayers, special diet, and sexual abstinence, as well as music and dancing” (Ustinova, 2011, p. 67). The actual encounter often took place in a cave or a special chamber. The experiences include contact with individuals, revelations of the future, and messages. In contemporary times, facilitated contacts may be sought through mediums or persons claiming psychic abilities, in some religious traditions and ceremonies, and in shamanic practice in cultures where shamanism continues to exist (Walsh, 2007). Beyond these formalized practices in Western and other cultures, individuals often speak to their deceased friends and loved ones, and feel they have received responses (Klass, 1999).

The process that was developed for this study draws on two current models of reducing grief and healing bereavement effects. The first is Attachment Theory,
in which the task of healing is for the surviving person to recognize that the deceased is no longer alive or present, and to release the attachments and connections with that person, rather than holding them with distress (Bowlby, 1982). The second model is Continuing Bonds, in which the participant maintains a feeling of connection, having a link with the deceased, while acknowledging that it is different from when he or she was alive (Klass, 1999; Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996). This present study can be seen from either perspective. The attachment model emphasizes the value of getting closure on unfinished emotional connections. The continuing bonds model emphasizes the presence of a continuing but reconfigured emotional relationship.

This research did not engage in the question of the ontological nature of the contacts—whether they were really some form of survival after death. These are apparent contacts. Sometimes ostensible is used in the same sense. The nature of an apparent contact was left to the participant. In this article the word contact is meant to refer to the judgment of the participant, which can be open to a variety of interpretations. In some scientific literature (e.g. Bentall, 2000), visual appearances are described as hallucinations with a connotation of pathology. The term apparition has been used as a non-theoretical term. Kwilecki (2011) uses the phrase inner visual representation without speculating on the origin of the experience. The term After Death Communication (ADC) has been coined for apparent contacts with a deceased individual. In this paper this term will be used, but with the understanding that the ontological reality of the contact is not necessarily determined.

This research study attempted to facilitate an opportunity for a contact with a person who has died, similar to the spontaneous experiences, and to gather data on the resulting effects on the bereavement state of the participants. The procedure was based on earlier research (Hastings et al., 2002), but with a larger participant base, a slightly modified protocol, and the inclusion of personality measures. The protocol included writing about the deceased, telling recollections, expressing emotions, doing non-verbal art work, and sitting in a darkened, quiet room (a restricted sensory environment called a psychomanteum; see description below, and Moody, 1992), all of which allowed the participant to review thoughts, feelings, and memories, with the potential to form a new relationship with the individual who has died. This was a 3–4 hour, semi-structured process that was carried out individually and guided by a facilitator. Participants completed questionnaires assessing the intensity of bereavement effects before, immediately after the procedure, and one month later. This article explains the design of the experiential process, presents the statistical results, and describes the qualitative experiences reported by the participants.

**PURPOSE**

The purposes of this study were to create a process that facilitated an apparent contact with a deceased individual, to assess resulting changes in the intensity of bereavement, and to identify personality factors that may influence shifts in
bereavement. This goal led to several research questions that were explored quantitatively:

- Can an experience be created that will facilitate or induce reports of a contact with a person who has died?
- What are the effects of such an experience on the bereavement state?
- Do scores on personality traits show correlations with changes in bereavement effects?
- Are changes in bereavement correlated with the length of time since the death?
- Is the experience in the booth a restricted sensory environment called a psychomanteum booth an altered state for a proportion of participants?
- What is the experiential (subjective) phenomenology of the procedure?

It is important to note that there was no intention to validate or prove the reality of the contacts with the deceased, nor to establish life after death, but rather to develop an experience that creates an opportunity similar to spontaneous contacts with the deceased, and hopefully to enable the healing effects of such experiences.

### Research Design

One hundred participants were taken through this protocol individually, in a 3–4 hour process. To measure the changes in the effects of bereavement, a standard single group, pretest-posttest design (Cook & Campbell, 1979) was used, with repeated measures of bereavement taken before the experiential treatment, after, and a month later using questionnaires with Likert scales. The Tellegen Absorption Scale (TAS; Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974) and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1995) were used to explore the correlations of change with personality qualities. The qualitative data was obtained via open ended items on the questionnaires, such as “If you could say something to the deceased, what would you say?” and “Please describe what happened in the psychomanteum as fully as you can.” This research was approved by the Human Ethics Committee of the Institute.

### Bereavement Measures

The effects on bereavement were measured by changes in the ratings of 20 items taken from previous research (Hastings, et al., 2002), using a Likert scale of 1–7, with 7 indicating the most intense level. Five of these were sentences referring to reactions over time, and were in the pre and follow-up questionnaires (See Table 1.). Fifteen brief items were repeated in all three questionnaires (See Table 2.).

Of the 20 items, 16 assessed distressful emotional conditions, such as grief, sadness, and anger. Four assessed positive effects, such as love and peace, for which a 7 rating meant a positive emotional state. A test-retest of reliability of the 20 items with a one week retest ($n = 22$) showed a Pearson correlation of $r = .93$ for participants’ total scores.
Personality Measure

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator form G (MBTI; Myers, 1995) was given to all participants. It identifies four polarities of personal functioning: Introversion-Extraversion, Intuition-Sensing, Feeling-Thinking, and Perception-Judgment. It was hoped to learn if the changes in bereavement were correlated with any of the polarities, particularly with intuition, feeling, and perception. The Tellegen Absorption Scale (Tellegen and Atkinson, 1974) was given to the first 48 participants. The TAS indicates a person’s fluidity of internal and external perceptual boundaries in areas such as imagery, synesthesia, intuitive senses, and absorbed attention. It was hypothesized that a higher score on the TAS would correlate with a reduction in bereavement.

Participants

Participants were adults from the immediate community, other states, and local educational institutions, recruited through flyers, announcements in newsletters, word of mouth, referrals from therapists and others, and a website. Persons volunteering for the study were given a screening interview that asked about the individual who had died, and screened to exclude persons if they reported being diagnosed or hospitalized with a major mental or physical illness. Participants were usually asked to wait six months after a death before going though the research process. Two or three reporting less time were accepted on approval by the director. Accepted participants received a package containing a consent form, the prequestionnaire, and the two assessments. This series began in 2003 and was concluded in 2005.

The Experiential Process

In crafting the experience, we hoped to retain individual support and personal attention in the experience. This was not just research but, based on the effects of spontaneous percipients, also a healing opportunity. In attempting to create a facilitating experience, we incorporated (a) remembering the deceased with memories, thoughts, and mementos of the person; (b) activating the feelings of loss, longing, and other emotions of grief; (c) awareness of unfinished issues and connections; (d) nonverbal levels of feeling. The process involved six stages.

Stage 1. Initial Prequestionnaire. The prequestionnaire was a measure of the person’s feelings at the beginning of the process and was completed before coming to the session. It asked for information about the deceased and the participant’s feelings and reactions. The intensities of 20 effects of bereavement were rated using a 1–7 Likert scale.

Stage 2. Initial Interview. After arrival at the research facility, the participant was interviewed in a counseling room by the facilitator, who asked the participant to talk about memories, feelings, and intentions for the process. The facilitators did not analyze, advise or interpret. Rather, they listened.
empathically and asked questions to facilitate the participants’ remembrance and expression. Participants were invited to bring photos and keepsakes of the deceased. At the end of the interview, participants were invited to use art materials (pastels, colored pencils, crayons, clay) to reflect feelings in a non-verbal mode. Most of the participants did this.

Stage 3. Sitting in the Booth. The facilitator then led the participant to a booth in another room. The participant sat in a recliner chair, looking at the mirror’s reflective surface. The mirror was tilted at an angle, not reflecting the participant’s face. A 7-watt light was located behind the chair and a dimmer for the light was on a table with a box of tissues. The instructions were to gaze at the mirror, adjust the light to be comfortable, reflect on feelings, memories, and thoughts about the deceased, and to be open to whatever did or did not happen. If the participant wished to say something, it could be said mentally or aloud. The facilitator sat in an adjacent room and was available if needed.

Stage 4. Post Interview. After 45 minutes the facilitator re-entered the booth room and led the participant out to the previous counseling room. The facilitator asked the participant to tell about the experience in the booth and how it affected him or her. At the end of this interview, the art materials were again offered.

Stage 5. Postquestionnaire. Staying in the same room, the participant filled out the postquestionnaire, reporting on the experiences in the booth, and repeating the Likert ratings of bereavement feelings.

Stage 6. Follow-Up. Four weeks after the session a follow-up questionnaire was sent to the participant asking about the impact of the experience, and a repeat of all 20 Likert ratings.

This was not a mechanical process, but required careful facilitation and respect for the person participating. The intention of the carefully sequenced protocol was to create an opportunity for a state of mind that would allow a shift in perception, feelings, thoughts, and behavior, and which would come in response to the participant’s own unique needs. It was not possible for us as facilitators to predict what kind of experience the participant would have. While some researchers may focus on the booth and mirror as a technique, it is important to remember that the mirror gazing was only one element among many variables in a process which intended to create a subjective environment that promoted change.

**Quantitative Results**

**Demographics**

The series was closed at 100 qualified participants. Only first-time sessions were included in the analysis. Sessions were excluded if the prequestionnaire or postquestionnaire data were missing. Not all participants completed the follow-up questionnaire despite two requests, and the follow-up analyses (only) were based on 69 returns.
The gender distribution was male 26, female, 74. The mean age was 47.4 (SD = 12.8), and the age range was 23–81. The mean age of 47 indicates this is largely a mature group that may be expected to have more contact with close deaths than younger individuals. The range of years passed since the death of the sought person was 0.1–88 (n = 89), with the mean being 15.8 (SD = 18.2). (The 88 year session was for a great-grandfather never known by the participant.)

The religious orientations reported consisted of Christian Catholic 17, Christian Protestant 16, Buddhist 11, Jewish 6, Spiritual 6 (2 added “not religious”), Agnostic/Atheist 4, Unitarian 3, one each of Muslim, Hindu, Unity, Mormon, Episcopalian, Sufism, “other” 11, none or NA 8, and blank 12.

The participants identified predominantly as Euro-American. The ethnicity of participants was Euro-American 81, Latina/o 4, Asian American 3, African American 1, Other/Blank 11.

**Reported Contacts with the Deceased**

The first research question asked if contacts would be reported. The postquestionnaire asked, “Did you have a contact with the deceased?” Of the 100 participants, 63 answered Yes, 27 answered No, and 10 were blank or “not sure.” This distribution is statistically significant: \(X^2\), (df 1, N = 100) = 6.760, \(p = .009\). Asked if there were other persons who appeared, 34 responded Yes, 57 No, and 9 blank. The mean decrease in brief item scores pre to post for persons who reported a contact was 1.19, and for persons who reported no contact was 0.82, indicating more reduction in bereavement effects for persons who felt there was a contact. Because all participants experienced the same “recipe” of the multicomponents of the process, the difference possibly relates to a specific effect of the contact experiences.

**Changes in Bereavement Ratings**

The changes in pre to post bereavement ratings were analyzed using a Wilcoxon Matched Pairs Signed Ranks test with Analyze-It software (www.analyse-it.com). The Wilcoxon test is an appropriate nonparametric test for paired variables. It calculates the change based on (a) did the participant’s rating of the item go up, down, or remain the same? and (b) how large was the change? The effect size was calculated by dividing the \(z\) value by the square root of the number of participant observations (200 for pre to post, 138 for pre to follow-up).

The global change for the 100 participants showed that 92 decreased in bereavement qualities, 1 was the same, and 7 increased, with \(z\) score 8.25, \(p < .001\), effect size \(r = 0.58\). The pre to follow-up change for the five sentence items (\(n = 69\)) showed 54 decreased in bereavement ratings, 6 increased, and 9 were unchanged. The \(z\) value was 6.13, \(p < .001\), effect size \(r = .52\). The analysis of the pre and follow-up measures in Table 1 shows significant reductions in bereavement for all five sentence items. Means are not used in the Wilcoxon analysis, but are shown in the
For the 15 brief items, 14 of the items demonstrated statistically significant reductions (\(p < .001\)) in bereavement after the session. The exception was the item of “Love” which already had high ratings in the initial questionnaire, and was thereby constrained at the upper end (See Table 2). The greatest change was shown for need to communicate, followed by sadness, loss, peacefulness, and anger.

### Personality Correlations

The Judging-Perception function on the MBTI was correlated with the global changes in bereavement (\(n = 100\)) on the post questionnaire, showing a Pearson \(r = 0.24\) (\(p = .019\)). This means that the higher the Perception function, the more a reduction in bereavement was experienced. Correlations with other MBTI scales were non-significant. The TAS correlated with post changes in bereavement (\(n = 48\)) with \(r = .38\) (\(p = .008\)). This indicated that the higher the TAS score, the greater the reduction in bereavement.

### Time Since Death

The fourth research question considered whether the length of time since the death was a factor in the changes of bereavement. For example, perhaps deaths farther in the past would show more reductions in bereavement effects from the passage of time. Conversely, perhaps participants with more recent deaths would be more motivated to resolve feelings or to contact the deceased. To test
A Pearson correlation was calculated for the length of time since the death in relation to the changes in the bereavement means between pre and post questionnaires. The correlation, \( r = 0.02 \), was not significant, nor was there a significant correlation with the bereavement changes at the time of the follow-up questionnaire, \( r = 0.11 \).

Another test of this question was to compare the number of apparent contacts with the deceased for the first quartile and fourth quartile of time since death sorted by length of time since death. For each quartile (\( n = 22 \)), there were 14 reported contacts. (Twelve dates of death were missing.) It appears that the time since death is not a factor in these results; they are not due simply to one's feelings changing over time.

### Altered Time and Consciousness

The postquestionnaire asked participants to rate the booth experience as an altered state (research question five). Using the Likert scale, the mean rating was 4.47 (\( SD = 1.78, n = 97 \)). A second indication of an altered state was changes in the sense of time. The 45 minutes of booth time was perceived as shorter by 60 of the participants, 11 wrote that there was no sense of time and several wrote that they were surprised when the time was up. Two felt that the rate

#### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Pre (Mean)</th>
<th>Post (SD)</th>
<th>Post changes</th>
<th>Wilcoxon</th>
<th>p value</th>
<th>Effect size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grief</td>
<td>3.61 (2.04)</td>
<td>2.65 (1.77)</td>
<td>55, 36, 9</td>
<td>5.17</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing the person</td>
<td>4.53 (1.99)</td>
<td>3.51 (2.09)</td>
<td>50, 36, 14</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>2.69 (1.91)</td>
<td>1.51 (1.07)</td>
<td>46, 51, 2</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worry</td>
<td>2.26 (1.71)</td>
<td>1.56 (1.16)</td>
<td>40, 48, 12</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt</td>
<td>2.88 (1.99)</td>
<td>1.86 (1.37)</td>
<td>46, 48, 6</td>
<td>5.45</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>4.81 (1.71)</td>
<td>3.09 (1.94)</td>
<td>72, 9, 0</td>
<td>7.09</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resentment</td>
<td>2.54 (1.88)</td>
<td>1.38 (1.05)</td>
<td>46, 50, 4</td>
<td>5.28</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>4.78 (1.85)</td>
<td>3.29 (2.00)</td>
<td>63, 33, 4</td>
<td>6.63</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peaceful(^b)</td>
<td>2.63 (1.90)</td>
<td>4.04 (1.85)</td>
<td>66, 21, 10</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to communicate</td>
<td>5.00 (1.56)</td>
<td>3.25 (1.99)</td>
<td>72, 17, 9</td>
<td>6.56</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love(^b)</td>
<td>2.04 (1.63)</td>
<td>2.11 (1.60)</td>
<td>22, 64, 13</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>.344 ns</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>1.96 (1.52)</td>
<td>1.47 (1.27)</td>
<td>30, 63, 5</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longing</td>
<td>4.03 (2.12)</td>
<td>3.03 (2.12)</td>
<td>48, 38, 14</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>2.30 (1.66)</td>
<td>1.67 (1.44)</td>
<td>40, 38, 12</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resolved issues(^b)</td>
<td>2.47 (1.47)</td>
<td>3.61 (1.70)</td>
<td>54, 27, 11</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>&lt; .001***</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means are shown for comparison; they are not used in the Wilcoxon analysis. A decrease in the mean indicates less bereavement distress.

\(^a\) The first number shows how many participants rated the item lower in the postquestionnaire compared to the prequestionnaire rating; the second number indicates no change; the third number indicates a higher rating. \(^b\) These three items have positive emotional value. An increase in the mean indicates less distress.

\( n = 100 \). *** \( p < .001 \). ns = not significant.

this influence in either direction, a Pearson correlation was calculated for the length of time since the death in relation to the changes in the bereavement means between pre and post questionnaires. The correlation, \( r = 0.02 \), was not significant, nor was there a significant correlation with the bereavement changes at the time of the follow-up questionnaire, \( r = -0.11 \).

Another test of this question was to compare the number of apparent contacts with the deceased for the first quartile and fourth quartile of time since death sorted by length of time since death. For each quartile (\( n = 22 \)), there were 14 reported contacts. (Twelve dates of death were missing.) It appears that the time since death is not a factor in these results; they are not due simply to one’s feelings changing over time.

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varied, 11 reported the time as longer, and 11 considered it to be of normal duration.

Multiple Variables

With 20 variables, it might be expected that one or two items would show significance at the .05 level, if chance alone were responsible. However, an inspection of the table shows that 19 of the 20 variables were statistically significant, and at a level far beyond $p = .05$. This is well outside what might be attributed to chance.

Follow-up Measures

The 69 returns for the follow-up questionnaire were analyzed to learn if the reductions in bereavement were sustained. The overall mean of the follow-up questionnaire's 15 items was compared with the mean from the postquestionnaire. The follow-up mean rating was 2.42 (SD 0.90), slightly higher than the postquestionnaire mean of 2.35 (SD 1.01). A Pearson correlation between the post and follow-up rankings showed a correlation of $r = .77$. Because not all of the follow-up questionnaires were returned, the possibility of selective returns should be kept in mind.

Subjective Experiences and Phenomenology

The questionnaires provided qualitative data on thoughts and feelings about the deceased person, first hand descriptions of the session in the psychomanteum booth, and the meaning of the experience. Participants were given individual identification numbers, and the transcripts of the questionnaires were typed into the HyperResearch (www.researchware.com) qualitative analysis program.

A phenomenological thematic analysis (Creswell, 2006) was used to identify themes and patterns. The author and two members of the research team developed an initial set of codes (a word or phrase) for information and themes that would be expected to find in the transcripts, such as date of death, messages from the deceased, memories, and visual imagery. Each transcript was read through and the phrases and sentences were tagged with matching code labels. Further codes were identified as the transcripts were read. The team added these to the codes and re-analyzed transcripts for their occurrence. To get consistency, the coders reread and recoded each other’s transcripts until there was approximately a 90% agreement for recognizing the same elements in a transcript consistently.

The qualitative data describing the booth experience, written by the participant in the postquestionnaire, depended on the memory of the participant, and was undoubtedly affected by state dependent memory, but
the immediate post interview helped to keep the experience fresh for the participant to document it. The oral interviews were recorded but have not been included in this report. However, Merz (2010) has conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis of the post interviews of the twelve individuals who changed the most in the sessions.

Themes that appeared relevant for the research were identified and the software program was used to mark all the appearances of each theme in the words of the participant. There were no responses that were universal, but rather some common themes mixed with unique elements. The following sections describe the frequent or important themes with examples and summaries. Quotations have been occasionally edited for paragraphing, punctuation, and spelling. Parentheses are in the original. Brackets indicate edited additions.

Experiences in the Psychomanteum Booth

To obtain qualitative data, the participants were asked to describe the experience in the booth. A blank space was allotted on the page for writing this, with the invitation to write on the back of the page if more space was desired, which occasionally was the case. The written reports included subjective and possibly objective phenomena. No single universal pattern emerged. There were common elements, but the diversity within these elements was extensive. Further discussion of experiences in the booth will be found in Merz (2010).

Four Experiences

To provide a sense of the sessions in the booth, four experiences will be described in part or whole. The first is a participant [P147] who was seeking to contact her father who had died 53 years previously. Her experience illustrates elements of meaningful imagery, mental conversation with the deceased, feelings of gratitude, image of a night sky as a sign, and a synchronistic ending.

The participant wrote that when she first sat down she felt a sense of peacefulness and openness. Looking at the mirror she saw clouds moving across the surface. Then the clouds took the form of a graceful, majestic bird gliding through the night sky, entering from one side of the sky [mirror] and then the other. She assumed it was an eagle, and felt as though it was quietly and peacefully announcing something.

I found myself initiating a dialogue with my father—a dialogue in which I spontaneously recalled the many gratitudes which I experienced in our relationship. Gratitude for his love, his unequivocal acceptance, his delight at having me as his daughter. I recalled memories, many large and small shared joys together. I thanked him for many things I hadn’t realized would remain long in my memory and accompany me throughout my life. There
was a sense of not knowing if he could hear, so I asked if he could hear, to make a sign. The stars appeared in the night sky—sparkling brightly. It felt like a response! [P147]

The “conversation” continued and I could “hear” his words of gratitude in return—though I was also aware I couldn’t remember what his actual voice sounded like any longer. (That was bothersome and puzzling, but it felt like a connection in spite of the technical problem!) The exchange continued, the sky was filled with stars until, suddenly the screen [mirror] went blank and there was a palpable emptiness and a complete void [underlined]. (The energy as well as [underlined] the visual picture suddenly left.) [P147]

Two or three seconds after the “screen” went blank, she heard the facilitator’s voice softly ask if she would like more time. But her father was gone and she felt the exchange was complete. She wrote, “The starkness of the departure was quite remarkable” [P147].

The meaning of the experience, the participant wrote, was that “The relationship remains intact—filled with love and comfort after 43 years. I heard/felt assured of being on the right track in my life, with my Dad’s wish he could have been here longer to meet his grandchildren and great grandson-to-be” [P147]. There were 33 other instances where the participant reported mental conversations with the deceased.

Participant 120 was seeking her brother, who had committed suicide. No dialog or conversation took place, but instead the participant felt she was intentionally shown positive memories to change her feelings of guilt and remorse. This is an example of a sudden feeling of peace or relief, mentioned in spontaneous ADCs (Kwilecki, 2011).

I was a bit worried about trying so hard that I would miss out on the connection with my brother. I tried hard in the beginning and then felt—heard a voice that told me to stay in my heart, to contact him heart to heart. Once I did I could feel tears rolling down my cheeks as memories/images of the times I was less than compassionate to my brother came rushing in. I experienced a big headache in my forehead (third eye)... I felt the pain and sadness of my brother in those times that I had hurt him. [P120]

Then from a place that I can not explain or pinpoint, came a rush of peace and relaxation. I felt tired and closed my eyes just to see in my mind’s eye a variety of the moments in which I had been caring and compassionate to my brother. I relaxed into those images and absorbed them without even noticing. [P120]

I feel I made contact with my brother through the images he fed me. Of course I was expecting a different kind of contact, but what happened was the perfect, kind, and compassionate way of my brother telling me that he is okay, and that he is aware that I love him very much. He has the clarity of
mind “to remember the good times; until now, I just remembered the pain.” [P120]

Some sessions were coherent experiences that could be described as being messages in themselves, and may or may not have had an explicit sense of the deceased. Participant 76 wrote that he was “trying to understand more about the origins of my family’s anger and rageful attitudes towards children.” He reported that in the booth the illumination level changed back and forth from light to dark several times at the beginning. He did not report a contact, but saw images in the mirror.

I saw faces in the mirror – sometimes entire faces, sometimes just the mouth, or eyes, or one eye. I had a feeling from the faces that the people were full of delight – bursting with joy and pure pleasure – unmitigated from worry or sorrow. The faces would appear one at a time, fill in, linger a short while, then fade. There were about 10 or 20 in total. The faces were unfamiliar – I could see them with clarity – more sharply than if it were a person at that distance. [P76]

He wrote, “I didn’t receive any verbal information, but I realize that I received a proprioceptive message – something about the joy and delight that fills the universe” [P76]. It should be remembered that the mirror was tilted away from the participant so it would not show his or her reflection. A few other participants saw faces in the mirror, but this session was remarkable in number, clarity, and their emotional expressions.

Another session that could also be called an experiential message was reported by participant 90. Notice the spontaneous and dramatic shift in perceptions of the participant.

I was immediately in a space of talking to my father, in my mind…. I went over the things he said to me when I was a child. He would call me “no good,” would say I never could do anything right…. I cried and pleaded with him for explanations for his behavior toward me, rejecting behavior. [P90]

After about 20 minutes of pleading, he became aware of himself looking into the mirror. He wrote “the mirror and I sort of became one.” He seemed to be in deep space and the mirror was showing clouds of stars. Suddenly he began to experience the situation with his father from a deeper, more all around perspective.

I began to see how he viewed our experience as a family…. I entered into his view and expectations of us…. He expected that we would provide us [i.e., the family] with the love and acceptance he was looking for. He saw himself burdened with duties and responsibilities that he had not wanted and blamed my mother and myself for this scenario…. I was expecting him to show his love for me. He was expecting I would love him. Like he could not show me love until he got it first. [P90]
This appeared to be a transformational experience for the participant.

I saw all this inside me while gazing into the mirror. I could see his expectations from his viewpoint. I became him.… looking forward to marriage, children, love and happiness and not finding it. Seeing this from his perspective has answered a lot of questions at once for me. Seeing and accepting his view has given me a whole new perspective on my old view of our life relationship [P90].

On the follow-up questionnaire, the participant wrote that since the experience he had “further memories, sense of presence, a reorientation of childhood experiences in the light of my experience in the psychomanteum.” He also wrote that the session “has eased off my blame toward him and helped me accept myself”. He explained, “My abuse was not because there [was] inherently something wrong with me as I was told, but had more to do with my father’s own view of himself, his life [P90].” No one else reported an experience of merging.

**Other Experiences**

Visual sensory experiences reported included streams and patterns of light, tunnels, grids, visual images, animals, the starry sky, and visual memories. Physical sensations of energy (see Radin, 2001), warmth of the heart, touches, and odors occurred. Positive feeling states were gratitude, love, peacefulness, calm, relief, forgiveness, tears, and reassurance. Negative states included anger (which sometimes shifted), disappointment at a non-contact, and regret. The communication events involved mental conversations, speaking aloud, hearing a voice, “ESP,” memories, questions and answers, and receiving messages, advice, guidance, and humor. See Merz (2010) for examples of other phenomenology experienced in the sessions.

**Transpersonal Experiences in the Booth**

Many of the exchanges and conversations were concerned with the everyday life of the participant and the deceased. However, there were also experiences and encounters that could be categorized as transpersonal, that is, going beyond the ordinary physical reality and sense of self (Hartelius, Caplan & Rardin, 2007). To begin with, the possibility of contact with someone who has died would be considered by many persons to be beyond the personal and into a spiritual or transpersonal realm. Participants did not usually comment on this; most of them appeared to accept the possibility, and only a few pondered whether they were making this up or not. Transcendent metavalues (Maslow, 1962), such as unity [106] and beauty [P51] were experienced or appeared in messages. Similarly altruistic emotions in the experience such as forgiveness and gratitude displayed transpersonal qualities. Direct experiences of unconditional love [P108] and profound peace, mentioned above, are qualities of mystical experiences, as are
timelessness [P103, P106], and light that was called the “brightest ever seen, but is not of the eye” [P45]. Angels [P45, P58, P117] and spirit guides [P63, P68, P102] appeared in some sessions. Reports of the presence of Jesus were given by two participants [P82, P102].

Sessions Without a Contact with the Deceased. Twenty-seven participants indicated they had not had a contact with the deceased, and 10 left the item blank. These sessions had mixed qualitative results. The reports included disappointment, sadness, and abandonment, as well as acceptance of the situation, resolution of issues, insights, peace, and calmness. These participants as a group reported the same sensory phenomena as the contact participants, such as changes of illumination in the booth, streams and spirals of light in many colors, intense internal body energy, visions of the night sky, touches, and hypnagogic imagery. Some participants reported drop-ins by other deceased beings rather than the person sought.

The non-contact sessions were usually different from the sessions which included an apparent contact. A sense of the deceased, whether by dialog, touch, imagery or signs, seemed to engage with the emotions and needs of the participant, and this usually gave the session coherence, structure, and meaning. Without a sense of the presence, the participants’ emotions were left without a response to their reactions.

Eighteen of the non-contact participants reported speaking to the deceased, mentally or aloud, even though the conversation was one sided. Some participants recalled memories. Here are excerpts from such a session in which the participant played a creative and active role.

I began by thinking of fun experiences we had shared together, specifically a trip we had to New York, a trip to London, and past birthday parties and celebrations. Thinking these and speaking out loud how much I enjoyed these experiences with her brought back a flood of positive memories and made me feel emotionally warm. During this time I was trying my best to stare into the mirror to see if there was “anything visible....” I did not see anything out of the ordinary. [P115]

Even without a sense of contact, participants often reported insights or resolution of feelings from the experience. The vision of faces from participant 76 (see above) is one example. Here is another:

I had a good bit of dialogue with myself about the issues with my father. Can’t change the past, can’t make someone be regretful, are the conclusions I came to. Can’t make someone be something they aren’t. [P87]

Disappointments and discomfort were also experienced. One participant who shed tears wrote that that the experience “seemed to be the next obvious step in my process. It took me to a place of abandonment that I would not have been able to recognize otherwise” [P139].
Long Term Follow-up

The follow-up questionnaire asked “Have you had any subsequent experiences that follow up your psychomanteum session, for example dreams, further memories, visions, synchronicities, sense of presence?” Twenty-five answered in the negative. Ten participants indicated they had relevant dreams. Participants reported 29 other experiences including sense of presence, feeling more at ease with the relationship, further memories, more awareness of grief, reorientation of childhood feelings, thoughts of the deceased, synchronicities, and greater peace and calm. Regarding shifts, one wrote, “I miss my cousin still, but with a lesser degree of sadness” [P123]. Another commented, “I was able to let go of the angry feelings I had towards my father” [P124].

She [Grandmother] shows me the life connections, me, my mother, my father, herself, my daughter. The threads go way back, even some nonhuman beings are on these threads, different landscapes and sensing of selfness. [P130]

The question also stimulated some participants to put together a message from their experience, even if it was not given overtly.

I’m clear that it was meant for me to know that I am surrounded by love and peace when I think of [the deceased]. [P66]

I learned a lot from this experience about my need to be more open in my life…. There was a question whether my grandfather was proud of me in my mind and I realized that only I would be the judge of whether I was proud of myself. [P127]

DISCUSSION

Contact with a Deceased Person

The data show reports of a contact with the deceased from 63 of the participants, with no contact reported for 37 others. This gives a positive answer to the first research question. However, a contact was not experienced by everyone; this is not a universal response. The contacts are at least similar in several aspects to spontaneous ASCs, with conversations, messages, personal guidance, questions and answers, and insights.

Effects on Bereavement

The data for the second research question showed that the experiences reduced the level of bereavement significantly, that the TAS had moderate correlations with reduced bereavement, that time since the death did not influence the changes in bereavement, and that the process created an altered state in the booth. The personality measures indicate statistically that persons with higher
scores on the Tellegen Absorption Scale (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974) and on the Perception function on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1995) are likely to have more reductions in bereavement. These correlations indicate that perceptual fluidity and openness to new data are helpful in going through the process. The study replicates the research of Hastings, et al. (2002), and gives support to the observations of Moody (1992) and Roll (2003).

The quantitative results of this study show that the bereavement process significantly reduced distressing effects for almost every participant. The qualitative phenomenological analysis of the subjective experiences corresponded to the statistical findings. Participants reported decreases in emotional feelings such as sadness, grief, longing, incomplete communication, regret and remorse, and increases in positive feelings of understanding, appreciation, gratitude, love, and forgiveness. There were common elements and themes, but the content of each experience was not predictable in advance. The sessions in many cases seemed tailored exactly to the uniqueness of each individual.

**Altered Consciousness**

The participants rated the experience in the psychomanteum booth as an altered consciousness state. Various kinds of altered states are associated with the occurrence of transpersonal experiences, religious ceremonies, transformational change and non-ordinary perceptions (Cardena & Winkelman, 2011; Tart, 1975, 2008). There is a need for more research here to learn how such states may induce changes and be utilized in accessing unconventional yet functional thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

**Considerations**

These results should be qualified in that the participants were self-selected and need-oriented to resolve bereavement in their lives. The volunteer nature of the research may have limited participants to individuals who were ready to engage and explore painful feelings associated with bereavement and who had a desire to attempt contact with the deceased. This separates the participants from individuals who would be reluctant to expose their feelings to an outside person, who do not believe in the possibility of after death communication, or who would be fearful of the process. The process was not intended to address persons with traumatic experiences (or posttraumatic stress syndrome) around the deaths. A related treatment addressing traumatic deaths, using Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR) has been reported by Botkin (2000). In short, it is not known if this process would be helpful to all who are bereaved.

A control group was not used in this study. However, in a single group with repeated measures design, control groups are often omitted, and the pretest is used for a base line. Statistically a correlation analysis showed no correspondence between the changes in bereavement or contacts and the
length of time after the death. Regarding the possibility of a spontaneous change in a short time, the reliability test-retest of the Likert scores gives some assurance that participant scores do not change significantly in a week’s time.

**Hypnagogia**

Some of the imagery reported can be recognized as hypnagogic (Mavromatis, 1987; Schacter, 1975; Sherwood, 2000). This refers to spontaneous images that occur as a person is moving into the first stage of sleep. These are mostly visual (with occasional auditory and tactile features) and have a wide and impressive spread, from faces, buildings, objects, and animals, to elaborate and fantastic landscapes. These appear to be not related to the viewer, are not interactive, tend to be brief, and may be realistic or cartoonish.

Sherwood (2000) suggested that some of the visual imagery in the psychomanteum could be of this type. Of the 81 imagery reports there were 28 individuals whose imagery seemed to have some hypnagogic qualities. Such images included an old pick-up truck circa 1930–1950s, fried eggs on a plate, a pair of animated ducks (the female one wearing a blue hat and collar) having a conversation, a bathroom sink with two tortoise shell combs, small animals, a landscape with a blue light behind it, a feather, wolf, crescent moon, an ancient scripture, and a goddess type archetype. The participants did not report associations to such imagery and the images did not appear to play any part in the bereavement dynamics.

**The Role of Preparation in Imagery**

There is a small amount of research on techniques for facilitating imagery in restricted sensory environments. Hood and Morris (1981) gave explicit instructions to enhance imagery for one hour sessions in a sensory isolated floatation tank. One group ($n = 20$) was instructed to imagine religious figures, situations, and settings. The second group ($n = 20$) was instructed to imagine cartoon imagery. The differences of the target imagery between the two groups were statistically significant. The results supported the hypothesis that the set of the instructions would produce more of the intended imagery for each group.

Terhune and Smith (2006) have shown that different preparation suggestions can act as demand characteristics and influence imagery in a psychomanteum booth. One group ($n = 20$) was told that the booth facilitated anomalous effects such as unusual body sensations, visions, sounds, separation from the body, and presence of another. The second group ($n = 20$) was told that the study was to see what types of experiences they might have, that they should not try to elicit any experiences, and that it was okay not to have unusual events. Each participant spent 45 minutes in the dimly lit booth, while a white noise sound track played. The experimental group reported significantly more visual images ($p = .033$) than the control group and approached significance.
with vocal effects ($p = .51$). The experimental group reported visual images (reported by 90%), odors, temperature changes, touch, sudden emotions, unusual body sensations, mystical beings (10%), and communication with the dead (10%). They concluded that it is possible to evoke imagery through preparation of the participants, and that an extended preparation period is not necessary.

The above studies and this present one show that inner imagery can be facilitated with various techniques, usually involving an altered state, and sometimes suggestive of hypnagogia. Except for this present research, there seem to be no studies in which the phenomenology involved goal-directed, interactive imagery and meaningful events. In these studies it is not possible to draw any theoretical conclusions about the nature or origin of the imagery or its functional content. There is room for more research into these questions.

A case can be made that change appears to take time to prepare outside of consciousness as well as cognitively, and this may have been part of the facilitation. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James (1936, Ch. 9 & 10, especially pp. 202–06) discussed the need for subconscious preparation in any radical change of the self, and it is possible that both conscious and unconscious feelings and thoughts went through a process of readiness for a change.

**The Psychomanteum Booth**

Moody (1992; Moody with Perry, 1993) developed his psychomanteum room based on ritual oracles from Western classical times. However, it is similar to sensory deprivation studies in psychology which have been given the name Restricted Environmental Stimulation Technique or REST (Suedfeld, 1980; Suedfeld & Borrie, 1978). In addition to floatation tanks of the 1950s and the use of complicated padding and ear plugs, the REST studies found that dark, sound proof rooms and supportive beds were sufficient for reduced sensory states. Research has shown the REST conditions can relieve anxiety, stress, and pain, assist smoking cessation, enhance creativity, and provide therapeutic gains (Suedfeld, 1980). The protocols usually have preparation or facilitation to direct the participant toward the desired goal, similar to this study.

Mirror gazing is an addition to these arrangements that comes from cultural traditions. Mirrors appear as openings to another reality in fairy tales, children’s stories, various religious traditions, and folklore, such as the practice of covering mirrors in a home where someone has died. Mirrors are found in shamanic practices, where reflective surfaces (including mirrors, water, and polished surfaces) are used for contacting spirits, divination, and entering shamanic states of consciousness (Lang, 1910; MacDonald, Cove, Laughlin & McManus, 1989; Tart, 2008).

The preparation and the conditions of the booth appeared to facilitate apparent dialogues with the deceased and qualities such as alterations of time,
facilitation of memories of the deceased, a sense of calm or peacefulness, spontaneous imagery (possibly hypnagogia), and shifts in kinesthetic feelings. There is no claim here for the mirror or the booth having magical properties, but rather the suggestion that the psychological preparation and the altered state from the reduced sensory environment enable an experience that promotes change, whether from within or outside the self.

There is some similarity in this experience to the ancient Greek practices, such as the ritual procedures, the use of caves and special chambers, and the likely altered state that ensued. Participants rarely mentioned the booth or an altered state, but one compared it to a floatation tank. At least two felt that they had merged into the mirror [P90, P154]. A few participants turned the light completely off or closed their eyes, which indicates that mirror gazing is not a *sine qua non* of the process, though some referred to the mirror as a source of imagery. Further research might explore sitting in an ordinary dimly lit, quiet, peaceful room, with and without a mirror, rather than the booth arrangement.

**Paths to the Shifts in Bereavement**

It is possible to infer from the qualitative data several of the ways that bereavement was lessened. Some of these depended on a contact with the deceased, but others did not. In some cases the shift seemed to occur through the release of a key condition, e.g., the need to say goodbye. In others it was a question that was answered. Sometimes the change was a widened perspective, or the restructuring of the participants’ thoughts. The participants did not appear to deny that the person had died and was no longer with them. They knew that. Rather, it was a feeling of incompleteness that precluded emotional closure. Taking 45 minutes to tie up loose feelings, to receive reassurance, to express love and feel forgiveness, or seek explanations: these facilitated a shift. Merz’s (2010) detailed analysis of the 12 participants with the most change shows how each had an individual way of making meaning from the experience.

It did not appear that participants became desirous for continued guidance from the deceased. A few participants asked for more sessions, the data from which were not included in this study. The impression of the facilitators was that multiple sessions led to further resolution with unfinished issues or were seeking additional deceased individuals.

In terms of models of healing bereavement, these shifts can be explained either in terms of Attachment Theory or Continuing Bonds theory. With the attachment model (Bowlby, 1982), the task of healing is for the surviving person to recognize that the deceased is no longer here, and to release the attachments and connections with that person, rather than holding them with distress. What this bereavement process does is to enable the surviving family member or friend to resolve or release unresolved issues, rather than leaving
them fixated. If there is survival after death, perhaps the exchange also releases attachments of the deceased.

From the view of a continuing bonds perspective (Klass, 1999; Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1966) the bereavement process allows the participant to maintain a connection, but in a different form, one that includes feeling a link with the deceased, while acknowledging that it is different from when they were alive. The continued connection appears to be healing. From this perspective, it could be said that when a person dies, the relationship does not necessarily end. It continues, but in a different form.

Are the Contacts Constructions of the Unconscious or Genuine?

Given the effects of preparation and priming on our participants, and the above research studies, it might be suggested that the imagery experienced by the participant is a construction created by some part of the self, similar to techniques used in psychotherapy such as such as active imagination and guided visualization. The phenomenology could be related to hypnagogia (Mavromatis, 1987; Sherwood, 2000; Schacter, 1975). The emotional preparation and openness could influence some part of the mind to construct a healing scenario which interacts with the participant just like a contact with the deceased. This gets some support from the imagery techniques mentioned above, but there is no model of the mind that spells out how this might be actually done, and such phenomena tend to get attributed to a subpersonality or the unconscious, which in themselves need explanation.

Another explanation is that at least some of the experiences are genuine contacts with the deceased. This research was not designed to investigate that question. However, if there is some form of consciousness beyond death, the emotional openings facilitated by the procedure, the lowering of defenses, and the altered state of the booth may make the person sensitive to such communication. The reports of our participants are similar to spontaneous visionary contacts and apparent after death communication from spouses, family members, and friends. This present research could go further to study this possibility.

There is now a body of serious, open minded research along with popular treatments on apparent contacts from a deceased person (Arcangel, 2005; Bennett & Bennett, 2000; Braude, 2003; Guggenheim & Guggenheim 1995; Klugman, 2006; Osis & Haraldsson, 1977; Rees, 1971). A general public belief in life after death is found in Europe and in the U.S., where it hovers around 70% (Haraldsson, 1988; Pew Forum, 2011). At this point both models (construction and spirits) offer explanations, but both resort to unknowns as a part of the theory. Each explanation has its virtues, and also its limitations. The best current discussion of this issue will be found in Braude (2003).
So far as I know, none of the participants asked the facilitators if the contacts were really the spirits of the deceased, and on this question, the facilitators were trained to say that this had to be decided by the participant. Indeed, the facilitators themselves held various viewpoints on the nature of the contacts, from active imagination, to psychological constructions, and real visitations. The results show that shifts in bereavement did not necessarily require the presence of the deceased. In the research reported here, the possibilities were kept open.

NOTES

1 Co-researchers. William Braud was the statistical consultant for this study and contributed editing and suggestions for the text. Further insightful contributions came from Charles T. Tart. From the beginning, ITP graduate student researchers were involved in planning the research and process, developing assessments and testing them (on themselves as well as others), creating the facilitation process, making changes and improvements in the procedure, and analyzing data. This article acknowledges their many contributions to this research. These students include Mary Bane, Linda Blalock, Irene Blynton, Karly Christensen McGuire, Robin Coleman, Rosine Ferber, Amy Gardner, Fabrice Guerini, Lizbeth Jones, Richard Knowles, Robert Kuhar, Sara Larios, Elisabeth Maier, Debora Mandelbaum, Rebecca Merz, Arvin Paul, Steven Schmitz, Joachim Schrbrock, Douglas Slakey, Ivana Steigman, Takanari Tajiri, and Cerino Zappa. We appreciate the research funding provided by The Fetzer Foundation, the Bernstein Brothers Parapsychology and Health Foundation, and private donors. The Institute of Transpersonal Psychology was generous with facilities and curricular support.

2 Our psychomanteum booth was a reduced sensory environment similar to sensory deprivation chambers and based on an arrangement by Moody (1992). It was a free standing curtained booth, 5’ long, 7’ high, and 5’ wide. It was placed inside a windowless, sound-insulated room which had an oriental rug on the floor and aesthetic wall decorations. A recliner chair was about four feet from the mirror. Although participants were sometimes nervous when going into the booth, they told of adjusting and often reported feelings of calm and peacefulness. There were no reports of claustrophobia.

3 State dependent memory refers to recall being linked to a particular condition or state of consciousness, and not accessible when the state is significantly changed (Tart, 1975, 2008). The booth was a restricted sensory environment that produced an altered state for most of the participants, as indicated by their ratings, reports of time alteration, and phenomenology. Several participants, when they stepped out of the booth, or arrived back at the interview room spontaneously commented, “Nothing happened.” Two even wrote this in their report [P45, P98]. This may mean that nothing of apparent importance or contact happened; however, it seemed in most cases that the person in leaving the altered state booth also forgot many phenomena that occurred. The facilitators learned to bridge this state dependent situation by saying, “So, I let down the curtain and left the room. What did you do then?” This usually took participants back to the memory of sitting down, the dark room, and dealing with the adjustment to the booth. They would begin to remember their thoughts, feelings, and behavior, and recalled more as they relived the experience.

4 Elmer Green (personal communication, 2007) told me that one of the research team in his anomalous electrostatic phenomena research (Green, Parks, Guyer, Fahirion, & Coyne, 1991) saw hundreds of different faces (some with different costumes) appearing in a large polished copper sheet used like a mirror, which was vertical to the person’s face. Experimental research by Slakey (2007) found that Green’s mirror arrangement facilitated vivid imagery of faces radically different from the viewer. Another reference to faces in a mirror is described by Luce (1975) as an exercise in a Buddhist training program for Westerners.

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UNUSUAL PHENOMENA ASSOCIATED WITH A TRANSCENDENT HUMAN EXPERIENCE: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT: This case study, which incorporates one experiment and a naturalistic investigation, examines unusual phenomena associated with a transcendent human experience, in the broad category of near-death and nature mysticism type experiences. The human experience is documented predominantly through spoken normal recall, as well as written and clinical hypnosis descriptions of the event, medical records and eyewitness testimony. The unusual phenomena associated with this human experience include a crucifix-shaped natural formation and face-like structures appearing on a tree strongly associated with the human experience and pertaining to a specific geographical site connected with the human experience. A number of possible explanations for the finding are explored, including paranormal explanations and chance. The finding is deemed to provide some evidence suggestive of highly sophisticated intelligence in connection with the behaviour of living earth systems.

Transcendent experiences, also termed religious, mystical, peak or exceptional human experiences, are significant events within the broad philosophical traditions of humanity (Bucke, 1901; James, 1902; Maslow, 1969; Ouspensky, 1931; White, 1997). There is a voluminous literature in the arena of mysticism and transcendent experience, with considerable debate in recent times as to how such experiences are best studied and understood (Evans, 1989; Forman, 1999; Katz, 1978; Schuon, 1984; Stace, 1960). Definitions of mystical experience are wide-ranging but the most common characteristic features of such experiences are: (a) a sense of noesis, a strong sense of knowledge and significance associated with the experience, (b) a sense of ineffability, of the experience being beyond words, (c) the transient nature of such experiences, (d) the preponderance of feelings of unity and harmonious relationship to existence, nature or the divine, (e) loss of ego functioning, (f) alterations in space and time perception, and (g) a lack of control over the event.

Broadly, theoretical approaches to the study of mysticism range from perennialist perspectives, which recognize the fundamental universality of the mystical experience as an event of pure consciousness (Huxley, 1945; Merrell-Wolff, 1973; Nasr, 1989; Wilber, 1995), to constructivist perspectives, which view such experiences as conditional on the conceptual and cultural context of the experience (Heim, 1995; Katz, 1978, 1983; Paden, 1992). In adopting a
middle ground view (Forman, 1993, 1998), which recognizes the reality of an unmediated, pure consciousness event, that may then be interpreted or constructed in accordance with particular conceptual, linguistic or cultural frameworks, this author is of the view that each of these perspectives offers valuable insights into the study of mysticism and transcendent experience.

Mystical or transcendent experiences have been frequently reported in modern times (Hardy, 1979; Thomas & Cooper, 1980), often having considerable impact on the lives of those who experience them (Ahern, 1990; Sutherland, 1995). By far the most common and well-studied events in this broad category are near-death experiences (NDE’s), which are reported by about 4% of the adult population (Gallup & Proctor, 1982; Knoblauch, Schmied & Schnettler, 2001) and have been interpreted according to various theoretical frameworks (Blanke, Ortigue, Landis & Seeck, 2001; Jansen, 1997; Moody, 1975; Ring, 1980; Van Lommel, Van Wees, Meyers & Elferrich, 2001). Other commonly reported experiences include accounts of greater love and insight, experiences of union with divinity or nature, psychic experiences and encounters with various forms of energy or intelligence. Such experiences can occur spontaneously, through trauma or injury, through the use of various psychoactive substances and within the context of spiritual or religious practices.

Among the challenges of research in this area, particularly in reference to the perspectives presented by subjects in their recollection of such events, is the highly subtle nature of transcendent experiences. Typically, the documentation of such events may comprise only a subjective report by the subject of the experience. Further, accurate recall in such cases may be complicated by a number of factors, including the intensity and state-specific nature of many such experiences and the limitations of human cognition in situations of crisis, injury or novelty. Nonetheless, there may be aspects of such experiences that can be subject to scrutiny, including novel information presented by subjects (e.g., which could not have been arrived at through ordinary sense perception), unique vantage points experienced (e.g., the out-of-body state) and so forth. In this respect, the evidence supporting the reality and validity of such events is impressive.

Whilst a thorough literature review is outside the scope of the current work, over a century of research has demonstrated that individuals in connection with such experiences appear to have unique access to highly specific information, including skills and abilities, or to unique vantage points (Harrison, 1994; Hodgson, 1897-1898; Ring & Cooper, 1997; Schwartz & Russek, 2001; Thomas, 1939). Hyslop (1909) reports the case of a man who found his body suddenly invaded by a foreign intelligence, suspected to be a recently deceased landscape artist. With little artistic training, this man produced several paintings very closely resembling unfinished sketches of the relevant artist never shown publicly. Tart (1968) reports the case of a woman who correctly identified a five-digit number strategically placed on a shelf above the bed whilst purportedly in an out-of-body state. Sabom (1998) reports the case of a 35-year-old woman who described the specific detail of a surgical...
procedure to correct a basilar artery aneurysm, including the precise character of a unique saw used for this procedure whilst in visual and, to a lesser extent, auditory isolation and in the context of accepted criteria of brain death, including a flat EEG, lack of cerebral blood flow and brain-stem response. Eisenbeiss & Hassler (2006) report a chess match in which chess moves relayed by an intelligence purportedly communicating through a medium were at a skill level corresponding to the known level of play of a former chess grandmaster player. These authors also report a 94% accuracy of information relayed by this purported intelligence through the medium concerning the life of this former chess player, including information initially believed to be inaccurate, but confirmed by subsequent inquiry.

All such experiences are valid and important events of transcendence of the everyday parameters of human experience. Some cases may present opportunity for detailed inspection of highly specific information. The case study methodology appears to be particularly well-suited to the scientific study of such cases, especially toward finding support or witness to specific details reported by individuals during such events. The current article presents a novel case in which unusual phenomena, including a crucifix-shaped natural formation and face-like structures, found at a highly specific geographical location associated with the human experience, provide novel evidence and information pertaining to the transcendent human experience. An overall working hypothesis was that a prima facie case for a direct relationship between the human experience and unusual phenomena could be made, on the basis of the rarity of the unusual phenomena identified, a descriptive goodness of fit of the human experience with these phenomena, as well as scientific explanations relating to the occurrence of such phenomena historically. An experiment and naturalistic examination were conducted to explore some of these questions - the purpose of the experiment was to consider the possible human meaning of a religious symbol located on a tree of significance to the human event and the purpose of the naturalistic examination was to consider the probability that a symbol of this kind could have occurred in a natural setting of this kind by pure chance. Further assessment of the working hypothesis explored the descriptive goodness of fit of the phenomena identified with the character of the human experience reported, the status of the unusual phenomena as evidence supporting the subject’s experience, as well as scientific explanations relating to the occurrence of such phenomena.

**Methods**

A detailed investigation of a transcendent human experience was conducted, comprising: (a) analysis of the content of the experience, incorporating an audio recording featuring normal recall of the experience by the subject, which was verified through careful examination of other supporting documentation, including self-report journal entries (dated in a consecutive journal and in the subject’s handwriting), eyewitness testimony, medical records and clinical hypnosis reconstructions of the event conducted by a senior practitioner of medical hypnosis, (b) a careful examination of the geographical locations
where the human experience occurred for relevant evidence. This investigation comprised detailed study of a number of natural features discovered during the investigation, including local topographical features and a crucifix-shaped formation found above the subject’s initials on a tree of significance to the transcendent experience, as well as several other formations on this tree. Experiment 1 surveyed 120 individuals with respect to the meaning or symbolism of a crucifix and inscription identifying an individual on a tree. Subjects were asked two questions:

1. ‘If you saw a crucifix on a tree, what would you think about why it was there?’ and
2. ‘If you saw a crucifix and below it the name or initials of a person, what would you think about why the crucifix and initials were there?’

A naturalistic examination following discovery of this feature, evaluated the frequency of crucifix-shaped natural formations by visual inspection of 10,781 Eucalyptus species trees, including 195 specimens at the site of the Eucalyptus tree of significance to the transcendent experience. The main trunk and visible portions of the branches were all carefully inspected for the presence of crucifix-shaped or other notable formations.

**CASE DESCRIPTION**

At approximately 0730 HRS local time, on a day in the middle part of 2001 (exact date omitted on privacy grounds), Mr. C, a 36 year old man, reported a transcendent human experience. The following is a transcript of an audio tape recording consisting of normal recall of the experience by the subject, with certain private details omitted:

‘My first recollection is a restless night, difficulty sleeping, agitation, restlessness, of feeling at times as though I am being assaulted mentally, intense fear - an environment of great trepidation, as though I am in grave danger, has overtaken the household, great uncertainty about the future, through the night, drift in my state of consciousness. Wake in the morning, get up, it’s pretty soon after dawn, perhaps around 7, quarter past 7 or so, I get up, my intention is to go to … (her) room and tell her (referring to a female housemate of the time) I’m going out, I put on my clothes … I proceed to … (her) bedroom, I open the door. She appears to be asleep. I say to her as I open the door ‘I’m going out for a walk.’ As soon as I had said these words, and this is hard to describe – it was as though something stood up and rose up out of … (her) body – a being, a presence of some kind rose up out of … (her) body – it would have been very unusual for her to get up in this way – she’s usually a deep sleeper, if she’s aroused from sleep she tosses and turns. On this occasion something rose up in a motion of sitting up out of … (her) body, it was my perception that her body was still lying on the bed – the presence came in my direction. Not wasting any time, shocked, intensely frightened, feeling I could be killed at any moment, with a perturbing and disturbing feeling emanating over the house in recent hours, ran quickly out of the house – I ran, slamming
the door behind me. I ran up .... Street, took a left into ... Street, running along into the park – across the road into the park on ... Street, next to the primary school. I run, run up through the park, into the street located at the top of the park, past the cricket club, I sprint up the street, there’s shops. I turn the corner and run. A strange feeling now as a I continue to run up the street corresponding to the railway – past the railway track – continue to run. Things begin to appear somewhat strange – continue running – cross over the railway track – run down past the ... mechanical workshop, Just a quick look at the workshop, I saw I believe an individual in overalls working on a car, hoping they wouldn’t notice me – no-one appeared to notice anything as I ran through – continue to run – jogging now, a little bit tired – I get to ... Road – I turn left and go up ... Road, entering into a region next to a college – children at that college, I run, now next to the creek – I see the creek and I continue to run – there’s a mist in the air, overcast conditions, very early morning. (More emotional) As I run now a remarkable change in the atmosphere of the world around me – I begin to consider my position – I’m not sure what has happened as I reflect on events of the past few minutes – I’m running away from something – what’s happened? Is this, have I entered an alternate reality of some kind, um, I’m not sure if I’m alive – is this an after-death state, have I entered a different sphere of existence, at this stage I am uncertain as to where exactly I am – um, as I run a strange experience now occurs (with gathering emotion) this is possibly the most difficult aspect of the whole experience to describe – I don’t know how much time passed in this state – but it’s extremely difficult to describe - it’s as though there are little openings in the atmosphere of the world, openings emerge as I run – and I run through them – now through here, now through there – there’s a signpost, it’s a feeling, it’s, it’s a familiarity to passing through this state – I somehow remembered this state - yes – these are worlds – they’re spheres – they’re spheres between our world and some other place, some other state – um I can feel the difference being in these states, as I pass through these – very difficult to describe – (hesitation in voice) holes – now through here, now through there – it’s as though I’m, I’m above my body running – now through here, now through there, as I continue to run. I’m running and yet I don’t seem to be going anywhere, I’m just passing through various states – I can see myself running – the world is strange, I feel as though something’s chasing me, I’m leaving the earth, I’m leaving, I’m going home, I’m departing this place – I have to leave in order to escape from this presence – in a sense there is no escaping it unless I can leave the earth – I have to escape it, for if I let it defeat me I would have failed humanity and all would be lost. Something emerges in the background – is it a human being, it is some other entity? Something’s chasing me, chasing me through the worlds – it’s, it’s not a physical, it’s something else, it’s, it’s, it’s a mental energy, - it’s an energy of some kind, an energy that has placed itself against me – very difficult to describe – I now find myself with my body again, terrified I run along the creek now, along the creek, it’s an open expanse, an open expanse of thistles, trees, and shrubs – moist underneath, it’s a bog, a kind of swampy ground underneath me as I run, the grass is tall, overgrown. I’m blocked – I, I turn back, I run, because there’s no way for me to get over this area – I run back toward an expanse of shrub, momentarily I contemplate diving, diving into and across the creek – to escape, to die – leave this place – something prevents
me from doing so, I stop at the creek’s edge – I look around – I see, I see in the distance cars (with gathering surprise) I can actually see the people in the cars far in the distance – their eyes, their faces, there’s a blond man in a car, he’s smiling, looking at the people driving in the cars is strange – they seem primitive, sad, like people from a lower realm – as though the people here are in a lower world to the one I’m currently observing from. I make my way back – fear, intense pain – where do I go now? I come to a Eucalyptus tree – a eucalypt – it’s enchanting, towering above me, protecting me, I’m laying back – experience drift, drift, shift in my state of consciousness, hard to describe, hard to describe, it’s unusual – Drift in my state of consciousness, I’m drifting, drifting back to my normal state (sighs) I open my eyes – I begin to walk back, to walk back toward home. I walk slowly back, reflecting on my experience, wondering what will happen next. I feel a connectedness and a love for the earth and its people. There’s a guiding voice assisting me – a spirit is with me – I gradually walk back home.’

This experience continued for several days thereafter whilst the subject convalesced in bed at home and later in a hospital setting, including the experience of ‘leaving my body and going through holes in space’; ‘being taken on a ride through the universe, being shown all of the planets of our solar system, and knowing their place in the scheme of things, everything has its rightful place, I felt I knew the reasons behind historical events, why things had to happen a certain way for us to be where we are now as humans, when I descended to where my body was I could hear sounds – cows mooing, people talking – drawing closer as I descended’; ‘I felt that the earth, the stars and planets are all very advanced living beings, that we normally don’t see this, but I could feel a connection to these energy forms and even felt I could communicate with them’; the experience of ‘spinning and flying through the solar system as though I was the earth’; physical phenomena such as a feeling of heat and vibration in the region of the forehead; and reported enhancement of his cognitive abilities, which he described in the following terms – ‘I felt as though wherever I thought of I could be there if I wanted to, or whoever I thought of I could know things about them, such as their thoughts and feelings.’ All citations are from an audio recording containing a normal recall description of the experience. The paraphrasing of the experience is regrettable, but is justified on brevity grounds, the reported experience being quite lengthy, with much repetition. One further representative passage from the subject’s description of regaining consciousness at night in a hospital setting (audio recording) is worth citing in full, with some details omitted on privacy grounds:

‘My next recollection is of waking up – I’m in a strange room – I get up – I’m looking around – strange room – danger – fear, pain – I feel trapped, captured, the door opens, someone looks in, withdraws, I get up, walk around, turn on the backlight – what’s this? It’s, it’s, it’s (emotional) it’s a beast – a large entity of some kind – it’s sad, as though its wounded – disbelief as I look at this muscular, humanoid, hairy entity – it looks back at me – behind bars – it’s behind bars – what’s going on? I say (emotional) and stumble back into bed – pain, fear … I feel a sense of, I can hear noises outside, noises, I’m drifting, as though I’m flying, as though I’m on a craft, ship of some kind, I’m floating, I
feel as though something’s watching me, I feel a sense of being under surveillance – a dialogue coursing through my body – love, love, love, unity, unity, unity, togetherness, togetherness, it goes on – we are beautiful, we are wonderful, we are not evil, we are not sinful, we are beautiful, we are wonderful, we are accepted, we are entering the new century, the new millennium – I feel a sense of intrusion, fear, great agitation, pain, fear, great trepidation – a sense of attack, as though something’s attacking me, as though something’s punching and kicking at me – I feel as though there are two figures at my bedside – I recoil, I recoil in horror, terror – I put my fingers in my ears and I begin to press – harder, harder- push – harder, harder – I’m being guided - harder, harder – popping sounds, clicking sounds – as though of some type of manipulation to my consciousness, as though something is trying to affect my consciousness, some type of manipulation – clicking, popping, clicking – as though of a recorder being switched on and off in my brain – clicking, popping, trapped – a sense of entrapment, of being trapped in my body, in this state, under attack, there are strange beings punching and kicking at me, smacking me repeatedly – my brain, my head is vibrating, my whole body is shaking as they, as they attack me – punching, kicking, scratching…. under attack – continuing to be attacked – my head is vibrating – pain, fear, what’s going on? Why isn’t anybody helping me – nobody coming to my aid? Eventually I, I feel, I can hear sounds, I can hear sounds outside … (describes two female voices chanting). I can’t make out the words – other people are screaming – there’s noise outside, there’s people moving around. Where am I? Have we reached the new world, the new earth? … under attack, I’m being pounded – punched – trapped – they’ve got my body – they’ve got my body. I’m trapped. In the midst of this – somebody comes into the room – someone’s come into the room – I feel something dripping from my head – something’s dripping from my head – someone’s thrown something onto my head – it’s not blood – like – I can smell, like olive oil, olive oil, dripping down my head, my hair is disheveled. Strange sensation – it’s as though my body is trapped in one world, being relentlessly attacked and battered, whilst my mind is elsewhere, my mind is free, has escaped the old world. Again the inner voice, the inner spirit guiding me.’

Results

Case Description

This case description was the overall character of the experience reported by the subject at this time, the report being consistent across all of the descriptions of this event. The specific experience is reported verbatim from an audio recording of normal recall description of the experience by the subject, including reflections by the subject on the nature and significance of this experience. The journal entries of the subject from the period and the clinical hypnosis audio recording were used merely as corroborative evidence of the event and were not reported as they are virtually identical to the normal recall audio recording. The patient’s exit from his home as part of the initial flight experience was confirmed by the eyewitness testimony of the female who was
sharing house with the subject at the time and was startled by the commotion of him running out of the house. The identity of the apparition reported by the subject at the commencement of the experience was not recognised by the subject. The audio recording descriptions of the event demonstrate a considerable display of emotion, including an apposite, palpable sense of fear and altered perspective. These recordings also demonstrate difficulty in finding appropriate words to describe transcendent elements within the experience, suggestive of their ineffable quality.

Medical records obtained by the subject under local Freedom of Information provisions and used with the consent of the subject confirmed that Mr. C experienced a ‘sudden change in behaviour and perception’ on the day corresponding to his initial flight experience and reported having achieved ‘a new level of consciousness and a mystical state,’ that this was ‘important for humanity’ as well as ‘the animal and plant kingdom’ and reports becoming aware at this time of ‘an inner flame or spirit.’

His description of his experience at this time in both the medical records and audio recording of the subject suggests that he felt it was of special importance for the rest of ‘humanity,’ that he had achieved something ‘important’ or ‘momentous’ and that he ‘wanted to tell others about my experience.’ This is a unique experience in the life of this individual, described in the audio recording of the subject as ‘by far the most significant experience’ of his life, and has had a profound life impact, particularly strengthening a love for nature and sense of ecological awareness (Botkin, 1990; Devall & Sessions, 1985). The subject felt as though this experience provided (citation from audio recording by the subject) ‘a new understanding of the world and the universe’ and that he felt he ‘had experienced what it is like to die and be outside of my body and in another world, looking at my body and everybody else from a different vantage point and then be re-born, reenter my body and begin a new life.’ Medical records confirm the subject was in good health both prior to and following this experience. The subject does not have a history of mystical or other experiences and the only history of some relevance comprised reported out-of-body experiences in childhood. Brief psychotic disorder was also ruled out as an adequate explanation of the subject’s experience as a whole on a number of grounds, including spiritual or religious insensitivity, the absence of certain key features of psychosis in this case (e.g., disorganised speech), as well as evidence of this experience as a highly beneficial and transformative life event (see also discussion section).

Unusual Phenomena at the Geographical Location of the Transcendent Experience

The transcendent experience occurred in a rural region, in an area of parkland. The most prominent natural features at the location were a waterway and a range of trees, grasses and shrubs, including specimens of the genus Eucalyptus, Lonicera, Carthamus, Themeda, Poa, Plantago, Cynara, Ulex, Lycium and Verbascum. Examination of the geographical location of the
human experience uncovered several natural features that appeared relevant as evidence pertaining to the transcendent experience.

A geographical feature that was deemed worthy of note was a topographical feature involving the spread of a local waterway. This feature occurred in the standard directory of the region (Melway, 2001), which comprises a computer-generated representation based on photomapping or aerial photography. The relevance of this topographical feature was grounded in the presence of some overlap existing between the nature of the experience described by the subject on the one hand and of specific topographical features, on the other, at this exact location. This was seen to be relevant due to the nature of the experience described, particularly the out-of-body component of the experience, and the possibility that topographical or geographical features may be described by a subject that may only be evident in this state (e.g., description from an aerial perspective). Specifically, it was noted that the waterway in question comprised two branches which terminate several kilometers from the location of the subject’s experience – one terminating precisely in an area of a designated regional cemetery (West Branch) and the other precisely within a local airfield (East Branch). Given that the obvious concepts associated with termination points of this waterway – of death (a regional cemetery) and flying (an airfield) were both dominant features of the experience reported by the subject at this location – this was seen to be relevant as a synchronicity or meaningful coincidence (Jung, 1952/1973) in the sense that the nature of the experience described at this location appeared to match specific geographical features of the location. In the literature of synchronicity, it is considered that precisely matching or occurring coincidences of this type may be meaningful or provide information about the nature of a specific event, such as Jung’s description of the appearance of a golden scarab beetle at the precise moment a subject was describing a dream which featured a golden scarab. Moreover, to the extent that Mr. C may have observed or added to his knowledge of this topographical feature during his experience, perhaps subconsciously using this information to later contextualize or describe his experience, it may be notable that observation of this feature from the location requires an aerial vantage point. This may lend some support to the out of body character of the experience described. It is important to note that Mr. C was not in possession of the directory containing the waterway relevant features at the time of his experience and report of his experience.

The key finding of this study was a 23.8 cm × 10.3 cm natural formation in the shape of a crucifix on a Eucalyptus tree identified by the subject as of significance to this experience. Mr. C had subsequently inscribed his initials on this tree, characterized by its two distinctive trunks, in recognition of its significance to his experience. Mr. C reports that this was the only time he had carved his initials on a tree and was an act motivated by the perceived significance of this tree and location to his experience. Mr. C remembered the specific tree from its location at a specific landmark (a laneway and property in the background) as well as the area in front of the tree where he had taken shelter. The natural formation is shown in Figures 1–2, with Mr. C’s initials not shown on confidentiality grounds. In the naturalistic investigation, visual
inspection of 10,781 Eucalyptus spp. (more than one species) trees had not identified a single visible formation in the distinct shape of a crucifix. No other notable formations were observed on any of the trees closely inspected. Occasional criss-crossing lines or natural markings were observed on a number of trees, but nothing that was in the character of a crucifix shaped formation or other notable symbols. Experiment 1 revealed that 89.6% of those surveyed had suggested that they would associate a crucifix on a tree with the idea that somebody had died at that location; 99.1% of those surveyed indicated that a crucifix accompanied by the name or initials of an individual suggested that the individual identified by such an inscription had died at that location.

Several other items uncovered by close inspection of the Eucalyptus tree, and of images of the crucifix-shaped natural formation, have been noted by a number of observers. These include two structures, confirmed to be natural formations, with face-like characteristics (eyes, nose and mouth) appearing just to the upper left of the plaque placed over the subject’s initials (see Figure 2). One of these face-like structures occurs in the lighter portion of the trunk, and another, adjacent, and to the immediate left of this feature, in a darker portion of the trunk. Curiously, and within the limitations of confidentiality restrictions, the face-like structure that appears in the darker portion of the trunk appears in its general character to resemble Mr. C’s overall facial appearance at the time of this experience, including the shape of the face and a physical feature that precisely matches one of Mr. C’s facial characteristics at the time (i.e., a moustache). A number of observers have speculated on the resemblance and character of the face-like structure that appears in the white portion of the trunk, but such speculation was not considered relevant to a scientific exploration of this finding. Another interesting formation that has been noted occurs just above the two face-like structures – this is a structure that in its overall character appears to resemble an angelic being, as described particularly in the religious and spiritual traditions of humanity – thus, the structure appears to have the general shape of a human body – thin at the bottom, larger in the middle, with a small (head-like) structure above the middle portion, and with two wing-like and symmetrical projections fanning upwards on either side of the middle portion of this structure. There appears to be a line, along the edge of a piece of bark, running down from this structure down to the face-like structure in the darker portion of the trunk. It is important to point out that, whilst some of the formations, such as the face-like artifacts, do not represent entirely perfect depictions or images, this fact has to be evaluated in the context of the tree as a living system, of the sheer improbability of such formations at such a location, and against the very real possibility that these formations may have undergone some degradation prior to being discovered. In the end, people can make up their own minds as to whether these structures can be interpreted in this way or whether another interpretation may be appropriate.

A noteworthy parallel to these discoveries is a meeting several days following the initial experience, confirmed by eyewitness and handwritten correspondence records (a letter from the old woman given to the subject), between the convalescing Mr. C and a stranger, a very supportive ‘old woman’ (referred to in
audiotape testimony, in journal entries and in the subject’s medical records), not privy to any details of his experience, who brought him a flower, and, two eyewitnesses confirmed, asked him to write his details on a crucifix type ‘cross’ she had painted on a sheet of paper (referred to in the audiotape recording and a journal entry).

**Discussion**

Overall, whilst it is difficult to see how one could definitively prove a connection, a prima facie case would seem to exist for a connection between the unusual phenomena observed and this human event, in support of the working hypothesis of this paper. The nature of the transcendent experience, the goodness of fit of the experience with the phenomena identified, the status of the phenomena as experiential evidence of the subject’s experience and scientific explanations of such phenomena are explored further in the following sections of this paper.

**The Transcendent Human Experience**

The current finding examines evidence associated with a transcendent human event. With respect to the experiential evidence, the experience appears to conform to the accepted criteria of mystical and transcendent experiences (Brainard, 1996; Forman, 1998; James, 1902) – there is clearly a sense of noesis associated with the experience, of ineffability and transiency (in the sense of transitory periods of concentrated illumination within the experience), a loss of control, feelings of unity, alteration in time and space perception, and of the dissolution of normal ego boundaries. Many of the features described by the subject have been thoroughly reported in the volume of literature on mystical and transcendent experiences (Bucke, 1901; Hardy, 1979; Mercer, 1913; Ring, 1980; Underhill, 1911/1993; Williams & Harvey, 2001). Thus, the subject’s experience of communion with the ‘earth, stars and planets,’ as ‘advanced beings,’ and of ‘spinning and flying through the universe as though I was the earth,’ resemble experiences of unity and connectedness with the earth or the natural world described in the literature, such as Bucke’s experience of the universe as a ‘living presence’ (see also Coxhead, 1985; Hardy, 1979; Johnson, 1959; Bancroft, 1982; Markides, 1985, 2001). Likewise, the subject’s experiences of enhancement of his cognitive abilities, exploration of the universe, encounter with other beings or forms of energy, of descent back to the earth, physical sensations, such as feelings of heat and vibration in the head region, a sense of instant knowledge or illumination and insight into the nature of things, are also commonly reported in the literature (Atwater, 2007; Grey, 1985; Grof, 1975; Hardy, 1979; White, 1979; Murphy, 1992; Ouspensky, 1931; Ward, 1957; Walsh & Vaughan, 1993).

The positive and transformative nature of such experiences (James, 1902; Jung, 1961; Stace, 1960; Maslow, 1969) is also supported by the current finding—despite the presence of very painful and extremely discomforting moments within the subject’s experience, the subject assimilates his experience overall as a momentous and significant achievement of his life. The negative experiences
reported by the subject, such as his experience of some kind of mental assault, of being ‘punched, kicked’ and so forth, are difficult to characterize scientifically, but are reminiscent of negative near-death encounters, such as Rawlings (1978) report of a young girl who had tried to commit suicide and reports an afterlife experience of demons grabbing at her. Such experiences have also occasionally been described with reference to the concept of psychic attack, involving the transmission of negative energy or influence toward another, such as by willful or controlled out-of-body experience (for example, Fortune, 1988; Monroe, 1971).

In addition to its mystical and transcendent nature, Mr. C’s experience also appears to be of a near-death character – the subject’s description of flight, of fearing for his life, the out-of-body state he describes, the perception that he ‘had experienced what it is like to die and be outside of my body and in another world, looking at my body and everybody else from a different vantage point and then be re-born, reenter my body and begin a new life,’ of entering holes or tunnels in space, the sense of distance from earthly inhabitants, the sense of profound alteration in the state of consciousness, of receiving information about his life and the nature of the universe, encounter with beings or spirits of some kind, his experience of ‘leaving my body’ and of ‘being taken on a ride through the universe,’ the experience of returning to his body, his uncertainty about his state as evident in his statement ‘I’m not sure if I’m alive’ all suggest an experience of a near-death character (Moody, 1975; Ring, 1980). The out-of-body component of the experience is also supported by the subject’s description of specific facial characteristics of people far into the distance, of his possible incorporation of suggestive topographical features into his experience and the experience of descent and return to the body described by the subject. It is not possible on the available evidence to determine the extent to which the subject may have been in mortal physiological danger throughout this experience – it is more probable in this case that the experience resulted from the trauma suffered by the subject’s experience and intense fear of impending death, which has been demonstrated to be sufficient to produce near-death type experiences (Rogo, 1989).

With regard to the subject’s flight experience, in particular the significance of an apparition appearing to emerge from the body of a housemate described by the subject, the evidence from the subject’s description of his experience suggests that the apparition was merely the culmination of a series of troubling experiences leading him to flee his home. The subject reported that he related the apparition to his experiences of being ‘mentally assaulted’ at that time and was keen also not to disturb the other occupant of the shared premises. The subject reported coming into contact with a range of distinct energy forms or beings during his experience, including a ‘large … muscular, humanoid hairy entity,’ a guiding ‘spirit,’ ‘two figures’ and ‘strange beings’ at his bedside, a type of mental energy pursuing him, female voices chanting, being taken on a ride through the universe, and so forth. In the broad context of his overall experience, therefore, it is important to clarify that contact with his housemate, who reported no real knowledge of the subject’s experience, was very brief. The subject reported that his intention to advise his housemate that he was leaving...
to go out was a courtesy as he was leaving the house at an odd time and so, for example, the other occupant would be mindful to securely lock the premises upon their exit.

Finally, the classification of Brief Psychotic Disorder (298.8) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 2000) was also briefly considered in characterizing the experience of this subject. Brief psychotic disorder is a condition characterized by delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech, grossly disorganized or catatonic behavior, usually in response to a stressor of some kind (e.g., childbirth) and that may occur for at least a day (but less than a month) before a return to normal functioning. However, leaving aside the unusual phenomena discovered, such a category was not deemed appropriate in this case on a number of grounds, including insensitivity to the religious and spiritual experiences described by the subject, the absence of a clearly identifiable stressor, the absence of disorganized speech and the fact that the experience reported was deemed by the subject to be highly positive and life enhancing (in contrast to most mental disorders). Furthermore, the degree of insight expressed by the subject both during and after his experience, the sense of composure and serenity observed by others in characterizing the subject’s behavior during his experience overall, the mystical nature of the subject’s experience, including his identification with a non-egoic, trans-personal realm of experience (e.g., his experience of ‘spinning and flying through the solar

Figure 1. Photograph of the crucifix shaped natural formation on a Eucalyptus species tree taken in November 2006.
system as though I was the earth’), appeared on the whole to militate against a pathological interpretation of this human event.

Natural Formations

Turning to an exploration of the most significant findings in this paper, namely the natural formations on the Eucalyptus tree associated with a specific human experience, there are a number of issues that would appear to be relevant in exploration of the scientific status of this finding, and in keeping with the overall working hypothesis of this paper.

Natural formations as evidence of the validity of the subject’s experience. One consideration relates to the natural formations in their capacity as evidence supporting the subject’s reported experiences – in this respect, the natural formations would seem to be of obvious relevance to both the ‘nature mystical’ and near-death qualities of the experience reported. With respect to the former, the presence of these formations in the specific context of this experience quite obviously supports the possibility of a profound interaction between a human being and the natural world. With regard to the latter, it is notable that the crucifix shaped natural formation completes the symbolic combination of crucifix and identifying mark of an individual that are commonly associated with memorials or with locations where individuals have died (see experiment
2). The highly specific and suggestive nature of this formation, given the obvious association of such formations with intelligence, does lend support to the reality and validity of the near-death aspects of the experience reported, and of such experiences more generally. Thus, the subject’s perception that he ‘had experienced what it is like to die and be outside of my body and in another world, looking at my body and everybody else from a different vantage point,’ is rendered more believable by the presence of natural formations of a memorial quality at a location of clear relevance to the experience. Nonetheless, this author does not think it appropriate to engage in speculation on this question, as there are certainly alternative interpretations of the finding, some of which may move into the territory of religion. It is not the intention of the author to speculate on such matters.

*Goodness of Fit of Natural Formations With the Human Experience.* Another key consideration in relation to these formations would seem to be the goodness of fit issue; that is, the extent to which the natural formations fit with this human experience in a broad sense. Assuming that such formations as crucifix-like and face-like formations, are quite rare and unusual phenomena from a historical perspective, given the sparsity of scientific reports of such phenomena, it is relevant to ask whether this human experience would justify the occurrence of such phenomena. Given the subjective nature of the human experience, a key consideration on this question has to be the meaning attached to the experience by the subject, who is, after all, in the best position to evaluate his experience. In this regard, allowing for a degree of grandiosity that may sometimes characterize such experiences, it is significant that the subject’s experience itself suggests something of great importance in this overall event – this is evident in Mr. C’s description of the event as a ‘momentous’ one, ‘by far the most significant experience of his life,’ in the profound life impact of this experience, in his experience of affinity with and representation of all of humanity, evident in his use of the word ‘we,’ such as in the example, ‘we are wonderful, we are accepted, we are entering the new century, the new millennium’; his concern that ‘I would have failed humanity’ if he was defeated by a pursuing presence; his experience of ‘connectedness and a love for the earth and its people’; and in his description of the event at the time of his experience as of being ‘important for humanity’ as well as the ‘animal and plant kingdom.’

Furthermore, the novel nature of the phenomena that appear to have given rise to this experience, the near-death character of the experience, the profound altered states, encounter with intelligent beings, of ‘being taken on a ride through the universe, being shown all of the planets of our solar system’; of feeling a sense of communion with ‘the earth, the stars and planets’; his apparent experience of planetary consciousness, of ‘flying through space as though I was the earth’; of descending back to the earth hearing ‘cows mooing, people talking – drawing closer as I descended’; the occurrence of experiences over several days, hospitalization; physical manifestations, such as feelings of heat and vibration in the region of the forehead, give this experience considerable breadth and scope as a human experience of this kind. On the question, therefore, of whether this human event could justify or fit with the presence of such rare phenomena, there would seem to be sufficient grounds to
suggest a connection of the human experience with the natural phenomena, given particularly the meaning of the event for the subject and also with respect to the representative nature of this event in the broad tradition of mystical and transcendent experience.

**Scientific explanations of the natural phenomena.** A third major consideration in the scientific exploration of such a finding relates to possible explanations for the presence of such rare and unusual phenomena in the context of a human event of this kind. From a scientific perspective, the phenomena are fully documented, the photographic evidence is of very high quality, and, therefore, in the spirit and ethic of scientific inquiry, these findings do justify fair and proper scrutiny. The possible explanations for this finding would seem to fall into three broad categories – firstly, psychical type explanations, which may incorporate such human abilities as psychokinesis or extraordinary somnambulistic attainments; secondly, chance and coincidence; and thirdly, explanations that bring into play some type of intelligence that may underlie such elaborate formations in the broad context of earth and life systems.

Turning to an exploration of the first type of explanations, of psi type phenomena, the only feasible explanations of this type would presumably involve some form of psychokinesis, that is, alteration or manipulation of the physical world or environment reflecting the powers of the human mind. Generally, such explanations can be considered to be highly improbable, given particularly that psychokinesis, let alone unintentional psychokinesis, of a kind that could produce elaborate carvings, crucifix-like and face like structures, has never been demonstrated historically. Were such abilities to underlie the current finding, they would certainly be worthy of scientific scrutiny in their own right. The only other explanation worthy of consideration in this area is the suggestion that Mr. C may have carved the crucifix and other structures unconsciously, perhaps in some somnambulistic state. This explanation can be safely ruled out for a host of reasons – for example, careful inspection of the natural formations confirms that there is no evidence of interference or human construction in the emergence of these phenomena. The edges of the crucifix contain irregularities, bumps, protuberances, natural variations, which are not consistent with intentional carving of this structure. With regard to the face-like and other structures, intentional construction would require considerable artistic skill and finesse in working on a very irregular living surface, that is also inclined to peel away or crumble when force is applied. Further, with respect to the crucifix - to physically produce a fissure of this depth on a tree would require at least the use of an axe and a ladder, since the top of the crucifix is over 7 feet off the ground. The author investigated this possibility by trying to position a ladder in front of this Eucalyptus tree in 2006, confirming that the ground in front of the formations on this tree is very uneven, rendering it extremely difficult to safely position a ladder at this location, let alone with sufficient balance to enable the carving of highly elaborate structures in an unconscious state by a human being with no artistic training.

With regard to the second category of explanations, namely, that the physical proximity and geographical specificity of the natural formations relative to the human event (including the transcendent experience and carving of initials on this
tree) is an act of pure coincidence or chance, this is an explanation that can be extremely difficult to rule out, since the limits of coincidence are difficult to establish. Whilst individuals can make up their own minds as to whether an event of this kind can be explained by chance, there are a number of obvious facts that would seem to render such an explanation extremely unconvincing: firstly, the evidence suggests that the crucifix and other formations were not present on the tree at the time of the subject’s experience – this is based on the following facts – (a) detailed investigative inspections of the site in the years following Mr. C’s report of his experience, incorporating photography of the relevant Eucalyptus tree, had not identified a crucifix shaped formation or other formations on this tree; (b) Mr. C made no reference to such formations at any stage, including under clinical hypnosis. If the formations were present at the time of his experience, particularly given his possibly heightened sensitivity within this experience, one would have expected him to have noticed them or to have referred to them in some way. Particularly as Mr. C believed that his experience was of great significance, he would presumably have pointed to the crucifix and other formations in underscoring this importance when reporting his experience; (c) the ephemeral or constantly changing nature of these features, the pattern of change that they have actually exhibited between periods of inspection, as the tree has shed its bark over time, renders it virtually impossible that they would have presented at the time of the subject’s experience in the exact form they display when the formations were photographed in 2006. The face-like structures, for example, disappeared when this layer of bark peeled away within several months of the tree being photographed; and (d) Mr. C confirmed that he had not noticed these formations, including in his initial experience and in marking his initials on this tree.

Even if one assumes that the crucifix like structure was present in some form at the time of the subject’s experience in 2001 (the face-like structures are surface manifestations on the bark that would certainly not have been present in 2001), the explanation of chance or coincidence has still to consider the following facts: (a) the initial experience of flight reported by Mr. C appears to have been in response to a fear stimulus and resulting trauma occurring in the subject’s home, which had nothing to do with natural formations, (b) Mr. C stated that he had never previously traveled into this specific area, which was consistent with his vague journal description of the area as ‘the back marshes’ (journal entry), (c) The evidence suggests a lack of subconscious knowledge of this geographical region. In deep hypnosis, Mr. C named six of seven roadways and six premises, corresponding to frequently traveled locations on the main route to his home. In contrast, his description of the specific area around the waterway failed to provide the names of three roadways, a building and the waterway referred to in the experience, (d) Mr. C had moved to this geographical region only 4 months prior to this experience, never having previously lived in this region, and had no detailed knowledge of this geographical location. The available evidence establishes to a very high degree of probability that Mr. C’s contact with this Eucalyptus tree appears to have been entirely spontaneous, (e) the historical scarcity of natural formations featuring human symbols, (f) the demonstrated infrequency of crucifix-shaped natural formations on Eucalyptus spp. trees (see naturalistic investigation findings), (g) the improbability of a crucifix-shaped natural formation at a site,
on a tree of clear significance to the transcendent experience and directly above Mr. C’s inscribed initials, (h) the rarity of face-like structures and other relevant formations occurring on this specific tree, as well as the sheer volume of formations, including the fact that one of the formations could be seen to contain actual physical characteristics of the subject of this experience, (i) specific reference to the association between Mr. C’s inscribed details or identify and a crucifix by a woman at the time of his experience – this finding also moves in the direction of precognition as the woman refers to a connection between the subject’s identity and a crucifix that had not yet arisen since the subject had not yet carved his initials onto the tree, and (j) the infrequency with which human experiences of this precise character are reported.

The third category of explanations for this finding would seem to be the most parsimonious, or simplest explanation, and also that explanation which fits with all of the facts of this case. This category of explanations does not require one to assume the operation of psychical abilities which have never been demonstrated historically, or of other remarkable and extraordinary feats of the human subconscious mind; nor does it require one to accept that Mr. C, in an act of feverish flight from his home, in response to a trauma of some kind, by pure chance, stumbles on the one tree certainly in this region, perhaps in the whole country, or perhaps in the entire world, that contains crucifix-like, face-like and other formations all in the one place. The third category of explanations assumes something that has already been reasonably established, that is, that the crucifix and other elaborate formations on this tree may reflect the operation of some type of non-human intelligence.

Overall, the current finding supports the view of the earth and the natural world as systems that may be guided by highly sophisticated intelligence (Bateson, 1979; Lovelock, 1979; Roszak, 1978; Russell, 1983). Plant life and trees are not generally associated with intelligence sufficient to produce elaborate human symbols and structures (Trewavas, 2003). Nonetheless, there is nothing to suggest that such formations are not possible, safely assuming that sufficient intelligence exists within the depth and connectivity of living systems (Bohm, 1980; Capra, 1975; Hay, 2002; Kaufmann, 1995; Lovelock, 1979, 2009; Margulis, 1998; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984; Sheldrake, 1981), that could underlie the occurrence of such formations.

Whilst due caution needs to be exercised in drawing assumptions on the basis of a single case, this is the general territory traversed by findings of this kind. At the end of the day, because the study of such formations may not be an established scientific discipline, such findings can be difficult to characterize in a definitive and categorical way – the finding is certainly worthy of careful inspection and people, scientists and non-scientists alike, can make up their own minds in explaining this particular event.

REFERENCES


The Author

Karl Hanes is a clinician and scientist who has worked in the psychology field for over 15 years. He has published a range of scientific papers, with contributions in such fields as neuropsychology, psychiatry, psychology and psychopharmacology. He has had a longstanding interest in transpersonal psychology, including the use of psychospiritual methodologies (e.g., mindfulness) in psychotherapy and the healing and growth potential of transcendent human experiences.

Author Note: In this article, I have aimed to involve the reader in the process of scientific evaluation and to invite readers to make up their own minds. Ultimately, things that are true will tend to be borne out historically and to find their rightful place in the scheme of things. I would be happy to provide some further details to those who may wish to find out more about the subject of the experience, in informing their reading of the overall findings. Refraining from such details in the body of the article, however, is meant to have advantages - this is just an anonymous subject, it is just a perfectly healthy and
ordinary person who appears to have been suddenly overcome by intense and unusual experiences - it could be anyone, it could be you! This mystery and anonymity of the subject also has the advantage of avoiding any tendencies toward megalomania, in elevating the importance of a particular person or person(s) - in this case, it is the experience and the phenomena that matter - in pointing to the possibilities for the display of intelligence or connectedness in relation to living earth systems, above and beyond the nuances or life story of a particular person. The human being is probably just an ordinary human being, just as the Eucalyptus tree in this study is in virtually every way, just like any other Eucalyptus tree.

Editor’s Note: An unusual article such as this, from a well-honed scholar, summons and encourages dialogue as it may evoke an array of responses in readers. Accordingly, editorial board member Dr. Charles Tart, a well-known and respected transpersonal researcher and scholar, has agreed to write a response. Join him in following the movement of his own reaction and thought as he experienced reading the article. His response appears after the reference section. We welcome other readers to contribute their voice as well and if sufficient response is received we will offer a forum section either in a future issue of the Journal or on line.
Reflections on My Flow of Thought Whilst Reading this Article

Charles Tart, Ph.D.
_Palo Alto, California_

What an unusual article. Very interesting!

On the one hand, looking at it primarily as a case study, there is so much more I want to know about the subject: his background, his psychodynamics, and the ultimate outcome of the process.

On the other hand, applying standard criteria from scientific parapsychology there is way too much subjectivity in here to make any claims about paranormality and the like. I can readily project all sorts of images onto the accompanying Figure(s).

On the third hand, how ingenious to survey a thousand Eucalyptus trees to see how common a crucifix-like area is! Just the sort of thing we need instead of vaguely saying things like “rare” or “common.”

On yet another hand, what was the methodology and the bias in surveying a thousand trees? I can readily imagine biasing things one way or the other by subtle changes in the instructions …
And on yet another hand (we need one of those multi-armed Hindu goddesses to illustrate this), the “subjectivity” in finding meaning in this kind of correspondence is at the heart of most human experiences, so it needs to be honored and studied, not just dismissed as “subjective.”

Should this article drive a lot of readers “crazy,” that’s a good thing! If the reaction is just a blunt refusal to think about the material, the responder has an opportunity to observe his/her a priori prejudices. If the reaction is more like “I could evaluate that aspect of things more clearly,” great, possibilities of progress! If the reaction, like mine while reading, bounces all over the place from “pure subjective nonsense” to “maybe that’s how it actually is …” Good!

The Author

Charles Tart, one of the founders of transpersonal psychology and long standing member of the Editorial Board for the Journal, is an Emeritus Professor of Psychology at University of California (UC), Davis, has held the Bigelow Chair of Consciousness Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and is currently on the faculty at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. In addition to his now classic books (Altered States of Consciousness, Transpersonal Psychologies, States of Consciousness) he has authored Living the Mindful Life, Waking Up, and The End of Materialism: How evidence of the paranormal brings science and life together. He works tirelessly to integrate theory and practice, has earned a Black Belt in Aikido, and practices both mindfulness meditation as well as Gurdjieffian mindfulness in everyday life.
WHEN THE DREAMER GETS THE DREAM WRONG
– The Hidden Value of What Is Not Understood –

William Stimson, Ph.D.

Taichung City, Taiwan

ABSTRACT: Analyzed is the case of a dreamer in an Ullman experiential dream group in Taiwan who had a dream about her Yi-Guan Dao religion that the author felt she got wrong. The case is significant because it (a) allows us to evaluate and question the phenomenon of some person in the Ullman group other than the dreamer making such a judgment about a dreamer’s work with her dream, (b) shows that even in those cases where the judgment might be largely true, it is most certainly not the larger part of the truth, for it fails to consider the hidden transpersonal undercurrents that are the principal benefits of working with one’s dream in the Ullman group, and finally (c) affords a view of those undercurrents. KEYWORDS: Montague Ullman experiential dream group, dreams, religion, religious fundamentalism, Yi-Guan Dao, Taiwan.

While it is true that only the one who dreams a dream can tell us what it means – not some outside theory, no matter how brilliant or true; and not some high-flying expert, no matter how great that person’s expertise (Siivola, 2011; Ullman, 1980, 1982, 1996; Ullman & Zimmerman, 1979) – we must also acknowledge that not all dreamers are equally able to make sense of their dreams. Between one individual and another we find gaping disparities in this regard. Some, without missing a step, dance limberly through their entire dream, from metaphor to metaphor, coming up with connections no one else could possibly have supposed lay hidden there in the images – so that the dream is enabled to speak out bluntly and shed dazzling new light on the most unsuspected waking misconceptions (Stimson, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Stimson & Wang, 2004; Wang, 2008). Other individuals, though outwardly brilliant, professional, and accomplished, when approaching their own dream suddenly show themselves to be so out of touch with who they are and what they feel – and so utterly under the sway of mistaken conventions – that they cannot respond meaningfully to the dream or access the wealth of wisdom and insight packaged into its images. At best they might reify some of its principal metaphors and, without thinking to look deeper, block out the dream’s potential to transform their lives by imposing on it some shallow, literal, and merely intellectual interpretation.

Between these two extremes of dreamers, of course, we find a seamless continuum of every possible intermediate. In this article I wish to present the case of a dreamer who on that continuum occupies a position closer to the second extreme than to the first – this is a dreamer whom I initially felt did not “get” her dream, or got it wrong. The case is significant because it (a) allows us to evaluate and question the phenomenon of some person in the Ullman group...
other than the dreamer making such a judgment about a dreamer’s work with her dream; (b) shows that even in those cases where the judgment might be largely true, it is most certainly not the larger part of the truth, for it fails to consider the hidden transpersonal undercurrents that are the principal benefits of working with one’s dream in the group; and finally (c) affords a view of those undercurrents.

LOOKING FOR TIN, FINDING GOLD

At Taiwan’s National Chi Nan University, professor Herng-Yow Chen directs a small program called The English Corner, whose purpose is to provide students with an English-speaking environment. Dr. Chen’s field is computer science but emerging research on language acquisition has awoken in him a passion to improve Taiwan’s approach to teaching English. I was astonished, when I talked with him, to discover how closely his ideas about the way people really do acquire language dovetailed with the work I do with the Ullman dream group.

Using the Ullman group method to work with dreams has a lot in common with foreign language acquisition. Our own dreams are not immediately intelligible to us for the simple reason that they present themselves to us in a language that is utterly foreign to the one we use in waking life. Of course this foreign language they use really is our own original native idiom (Fromm, 1951). This idiom is comprised of pictures of the truth of our situation (Campbell, 1949; Freud, 1900/1965; Jung, 1933; Jung, 1952/1974) – as perceived by modalities operative in us of which we are not normally aware. It is not just pre-verbal, this forgotten language we all have built into us – it is post-verbal. It did not just come before language in our phylogeny and ontogeny, even today it goes beyond our most adult and professional language in that, like authentic religious experience, poetry, and art – it arises from places in us far deeper and more virgin than even the most advanced language can fully reach. When it overflows into such powerful waking expressions as art, poetry or instances of religious enlightenment, or even when it just overflows into dreams, it informs our waking language and develops it. The waking language needs this because it is still so partial, and still so foreign to our deepest transcendental nature, that it leaves out and cannot express a great deal of what we are. We work with dreams in the Ullman group in order to re-discover some measure of this that has been left out of our self-concept – and to re-own it so that we may more fully become what we are and reconnect with each other and the world around us in ways that are more true and sustainable.

The Montague Ullman experiential dream group is the method of choice for working with dreams because it eschews any acquired or imposed ideology and does not inflict any mode of interpretation upon a dream. Rather it views the dream itself as the truth about the current life of the person who dreamed it. In other words, it does not try to reduce the expansive language of the dream to the cramped and confined constructs of our waking idiom (= dream interpretation) but instead attempts to blow apart the petty constraint of this waking idiom by means of a series of steps that allow a whiff of the deeper
truth of the dream’s language to be perceived so that it can exert its healing effect on the soul (= dream appreciation).

The steps of the Ullman Process are simple, essential, and well known. The entire process needs to be followed and it needs to be followed to the letter – not in the small-minded nit-picking sense of strictly enforcing the rules, but rather in the fun, free and creative sense of always adhering to, and discovering in an ever-deeper way the spirit of the endeavor. Group members almost always quickly make sincere efforts to abide by the rules the moment they get an intimation of the deeper genius of the process. (The details of the process—including information regarding its development and field testing—are offered as an appendix, which the reader may want to access before or during the reading of this article.)

Dr. Chen and I quickly came to the conclusion that the Ullman dream group would be perfect for the English Corner because dreams are so interesting and the work on them so intense, captivating, and fast-moving that there can be no time for anyone to think about speaking English correctly, or to be afraid of making mistakes. With the conscious mind diverted completely by the Sherlock Holmes search for clues connecting a dream with a dreamer’s life, the soaking up of English and the speaking of it become entirely an unconscious function. Instead of being shackled with having to perform in English, the students are suddenly freed in the dream group to actually acquire English in the way a language can best be acquired – unconsciously, spontaneously, and in a context that is safe, engaging, interesting, and fun. Of course, the participants must know enough English for this to work; but in Taiwan this is not a problem since for so many years Taiwan’s ruthless teachers have so doggedly drilled into each of them the dead mechanics of the language.

When I did start leading dream groups in the English Corner I made it clear to those who came that I did not intend to talk about English at all and that so long as everybody else understood what someone was saying it did not matter whether they said it correctly or not. English proficiency, I emphasized, was the least of what they would get from the dream group. “You might have come here looking for tin,” I said, “But you will go away having found gold.” It proved to be true. Every student who stayed and became a part of one of the groups did end up walking away with rare treasures of self-understanding. They also all ended up chattering away in English freely and comfortably.

A LITTLE GIRL IN A DREAM GROUP OF GROWN UPS

“Will you let my little girl into your English Corner dream group?” read an e-mail I received from a man I assumed to be a faculty member at the university.

“I would be glad to have her in the group,” I e-mailed back. I assumed the man’s daughter was a student there at the university. To my surprise an eleven year-old elementary school student showed up the following week. I will call her Yu-Li, though that is not her real name.
The dreams of the graduate students and undergraduates in the group at times dealt with matters Yu-Li had not yet learned about. “What is rape?” she asked, for instance, in one of the first groups, when the word came up in connection with a graduate student’s dream.

I had to think fast. “It is when someone forces you to do something you do not want to do,” was how I put it.

That Yu-Li did not know what she did not know turned out not to be a problem – for she proved to still know so much that the rest of us had forgotten. Whenever she spoke up, everyone was delighted and listened.

Following the work with one dream she was the only member of the group who did not offer an orchestrating projection. Since she always did try to contribute something at this stage, I did not want to go forward without her getting a chance. “Did you want to say anything this time?” I asked.

“The others already said everything I wanted to say,” she replied in a sunken voice.

“Sometimes,” I suggested, “It is useful still to try to say it anyway in our own words because when we do it comes out a little bit different from the way anybody else put it, and maybe it turns out to be just what the dreamer needs to hear.”

“O.K.,” she said. She looked through her notes, gathered her thoughts, and told the dreamer what she thought.

“What Yu-Li said strikes me as the most essential meaning of this dream,” the dreamer said when her turn came to speak.

Whenever Yu-Li shared one of her own dreams, the group learned about her mother, whom the dreams depicted as being overly pushy in getting Yu-Li to do what she thought was good for her. “She feeds me a juice that she makes fresh every day,” Yu-Li told us, for example. “She even puts yam leaves in it. It is green!” she shuddered as a look of disgust came over her face. “She makes me drink it so that I will grow tall.”

**Yu-Li’s Mother Comes to the Dream Group**

Before long Yu-Li’s mother – I will call her Ji-Lan, though that is not her real name, contacted me. She said her daughter strictly observed the dream group’s commitment to confidentiality and had not divulged a bit of what went on there, but she gave off the feeling that very interesting things were happening. “Is there space for me in the group?” she asked. I checked with Yu-Li first; then admitted her mother into a dream group that met on a different day.
The mother turned out to be as enthusiastic about dreams as the daughter, but quickly showed herself to be the person I was acquainted with from the little girl’s dreams. For example, a dreamer only had to begin groping for the right word, and Ji-Lan would instantly supply it.

“We do not want the word someone else thinks the dreamer is going to say,” I explained. “We want the word the dreamer herself comes up with, no matter how long it takes her to find it.” Ji-Lan really tried to master the uniquely un-authoritarian etiquette of the Ullman group, but found it difficult not to play the authority again and again. For instance, once a graduate student – a young woman brilliant and gifted with dreams – shared a dream about her major professor, whose nit-picking criticism was killing her passion for research. Before I could stop Ji-Lan, she interrupted the dreamer and rose to the professor’s defense. Offering herself as an example, she said she was so brutally critical of her own graduate students’ work that often she feared one of them would attempt suicide – but emphasized she did it for the student’s own good. The group process moved rapidly forward. I did not get a chance to tell Ji-Lan she had violated the process. I could see I was not about to change her personality anyway.

Besides, I saw how sincere and meaningful the work was that she did with her own dreams. In bringing out the previous-day’s context for one of them, she paraphrased a passage she had read in a scripture of her Yi-Guan Dao religion:

> You can see thing with bright mind very clearly, but at the same time you should have the mind to tolerate something you don’t like. If only bright mind, make you more sensitive, but easy to get angry, without tolerance. [i.e., Practicing Yi-Guan Dao, you attain a bright mind that is acutely sensitive. You see very clearly what you don’t like. The danger at this point is that you become vulnerable to intolerance and anger.]

“This passage is very helpful to my current situation,” she told us. It seemed to me she was confessing to us that in reading the passage in the book she had recognized what we ourselves had seen in her behavior – that there was the intelligent, critical part of herself which she had developed to a high degree and was connected with. It could see what was wrong with others and felt it could tell them what they should do to correct themselves. But then there was another, more highly developed and important part of herself that she sensed she was not yet sufficiently connected with. She did not appear to know exactly what that other part was, but seemed to feel it would be more compassionate and tolerant of the way people were, and that it would also be more effective in behaving in a way that enabled them to change.

I came to sense that of all those in the group Ji-Lan needed this work with dreams the most and might very possibly in the end put it to the best use. More than once she told us she was ready for something more in her life. She wanted to live deeper and go beyond mere professional advancement. She was touchingly grateful for every tiny insight she got from working with her dreams. When once the group proved unable to make any headway at all with the dream she had shared, she came back the following week to tell us that
having worked with that dream in the group turned out to be deeply meaningful to her in an unsuspected way. She did not elaborate.

Something was stirring in this woman.

**Ji-Lan’s Dream**

A few weeks after this, when I called for a dream, no one in the group came forward. We sat in silence almost ten minutes, waiting.

“I have a dream,” Ji-Lan finally said. It’s a short one. It’s from this morning.”

She told us the dream:

_A Dao Transmitting Master asked me, “Where did you get this book?” I tell her White Water Old Man give it to me. He gives the books to four people. I am one of them. She replied, “He was dead.” I told her, “His soul is in somebody’s body and this media gave the books to me on his behalf.” It’s my honor to receive this book from him._

“Are any of the people in the dream real?” we asked.

Ji-Lan said:

_The Dao Transmitting Master is a real person. If we want to become a member of the Yi-Guan Dao we need a Dao Transmitting Master. There’s a ceremony. Must be there. He will represent our holy teacher to give us three treasures. Our holy teacher is the Living Buddha. Was a monk in the Song Dynasty. Unless we become a member of Yi-Guan Dao, these treasures we cannot tell anyone. Only Dao Transmitting Master can tell us. She is a woman over 60 years old. Looks not so friendly but I know she is friendly. Usually she encourages people in Yi-Guan Dao. Use the way to blame them and correct them something, point out very directly someone’s mistake. She thinks she has a better way and will propose her way very strongly. Has a good purpose but uses stress way. Force herself also use the same way [i.e., she is pushy towards herself in the same way she is towards others.]_

“Is anyone else in the dream real?” we asked.

She said:

_White Water Old Man is a real person. He passed away. He has a good habit. He didn’t like any drink, only water. Sixty years ago when Communists occupy Red China, White Water Old Man came to Taiwan and spread Dao. Kuomingtang didn’t allow any other religion spread in Taiwan. He separate[d] from his wife and kids and came to Taiwan alone. Gave up his family to help more of us to receive Dao. To receive the Dao means we receive the three treasures [i.e., the Mystic Portal, the True Scripture or Wordless_
Scripture, and the Hand Seal], we learn how to cultivate ourselves. In our religion we worship Ji Gong Living Buddha, even though he passed away in Song Dynasty. If people receive the Dao, [they] have opportunity to become a Buddha one day. When he [White Water Old Man] passed away our heaven mother want[ed] to give him Buddha name but he doesn’t want. He just wants his name White Water Old Man.

“And the medium, we asked, “Is that a real person?”

She said:

The medium is not a real person.

“What were your feelings in the dream?” we asked.

She said:

I feel very pleasure. Is my great honor to receive this book from White Water Old Man. We respect him very much and try to act like him. He is a role model in our Dao Society. Because the Dao Transmitting Master use[s] stress way to encourage people. When she ask[s], “Where did you get this book?” I feel very proud because I get something she never had [i.e., I received something that she herself never received.] She looked surprised. What I got was beyond her expectation. The four books were the same [i.e., identical]. I received one of them.

The group took the dream and explored it for feelings and metaphors. Afterwards Ji-Lan responded:

I always have a question why I came to earth, what is purpose of real life? Not just my position and work here at the university, what can I contribute to this world? Something meaningful. Last Thursday [the evening just before the dream] I attended a study group in Dao society. I haven’t attended such a study class in more than ten years. It’s the first time I did so here in Puli. I seldom approach Dao Chin [= fellow practitioners] I haven’t met Dao Chin in Puli. First time I came to the temple to attend the study group. Feel relaxed. Sit and listen to lecturer speak. Look at picture of Buddha. Feel my mind is peaceful. Also observe many people making ... progress, making effort to cultivate themselves. I should cultivate myself aggressively. That’s what happen[ed] before I went [to] sleep. Meaning of dream? I feel special, important. I have some sense of that. Feel maybe I’m the selected one, also is a burden to me, means you promise something. I still wonder why four books; I’m one of the receivers? When I wake up I felt my surprise I didn’t intend to do such things beyond them include my Dao Transmitting Master and White Water Old Man. I didn’t have such passion like them. I just want to imitate them as my role model, just want to follow them. The subject of the lecture was about four saints in ancient China:

1. Confucius
I know why four books in the dream because I attended study class. They introduce four saints. Reflection is I should re-read history of these four saints again. Actually I don’t agree [with] this way. I’m affected by …Chinese history. But when I grow up I don’t think that’s a good way if we want to have an independent thinking [i.e., an independent way of thinking for ourselves]. I don’t think that’s a proper way. But after I attend the class I think I should re-read history again and get something good from that.

“That’s all,” she said.

“Would you like to go to the next stage, where we set the dream aside and look at what happened the day before?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“Do you want to say anything about whatever thoughts might have been running through your mind that night just before dozing off to sleep?” I asked.

She said:

After I went home my daughter Yu-Li asked me “What did you learn from study class?” I told her about the four saints. When I mentioned Confucius Yu-Li said, “He is the man; I want to go back and blame him because I’ve got to memorize all the filial piety bible and to recite it in public at school.” She hates it. This filial piety bible was made by Confucius. I told her the filial piety was to educate his students but [he] didn’t ask them to memorize. “Your school is wrong,” I told her, “But not Confucius.” The last thoughts I had before going to sleep: I feel calm. I don’t think that much. I think I made a good answer to Yu-Li.

“Do you want to say anything about anything that happened earlier that day?” I asked.

She said:

Feeling before going to study class: Is good for me have something different, new coming into my life, let me think I still have something to pursue. I want to have something change that night. I don’t think to work at this university can… Not just read textbook… Not enough to me to fulfill my life. [i.e., Just to work at this university, read textbooks, etc. is not enough to fulfill my life]. I also want to be rich in my mind, not just rich in my pocket.

“Do you want to say anything more about what you mean by ‘rich in my mind’?” I asked.
She said:

*I think if you cultivate yourself you will observe that life is change, you cannot hold on; freeze the beautiful moment. I [am] wondering why I came here. I feel I am satisfied at my current physical life. I don’t have to worry about money, family. But I’m lack[ing] in my spiritual life.*

[pause]

*I’m a person [who] doesn’t want to chase a lot of money. I have enough money to spend. I am lucky. I feel I am lack[ing] in my spiritual life.*

“Do you want to say anything more about what you mean by ‘spiritual life?’” I asked.

She said:

*Should the dream group provide another way to let me go back to heaven?*

[pause]

*When I pass away I don’t want to go to the hell.*

I asked if she wanted to go to the next stage, the playback, in which we present the dream back to her, bit by bit, and, in light of everything she has shared, she tells us now how the dream connects with her real life, and what new insight she finds in it.

She said yes.

A group member read: **“A DAO TRANSMITTING MASTER ASKED YOU, “WHERE DID YOU GET THIS BOOK?””**

Ji-Lan said:

*The Dao Transmitting Master affect[ed] me a lot when I enter[ed] the [Yi-Guan Dao] order. I think I have some similar personality with her. When I see something good I like to use a pushy way [and] force people accept it, even though I know he or she will not like that at the moment. But in the future will find [it] is good for them.*

It is always an exhilarating moment when a dreamer catches in the dream’s opening image, like this, a direct connection with her waking life. This dream addresses the trait of pushy and helpful authority Ji-Lan displayed in the dream group and that characterized her in her daughter’s dreams in the other group.

The group member read the next piece of the dream: **“YOU TELL HER WHITE WATER OLD MAN GAVE IT TO YOU. HE GAVE THE BOOK TO FOUR PEOPLE YOU ARE ONE OF THEM.”**
Ji-Lan started out:

*The book means* I need to study.

Then, flaring for an instant with inspiration, she added:

*When we read a book we open a window to other world, see something differently.*

Here she swings deeper into her dance with the dream. The dream tells her there is a different way she can look at the world. When a dreamer, who only minutes ago had no clue about her dream, turns to it now in the playback stage like this and pours out associations that no one else in the group ever possibly could have guessed were there, we see real dream work going the way it should. Only the dreamer can do this, no one else. All the rest of us can do is sit there amazed and dazzled, waiting for what the dreamer says next.

The dream is short and contains essentially four metaphors (the Dao Transmitting Master, the Book, the White Water Old Man, and the “Medium”). It presents a puzzle consisting of four interlocking pieces. Ji-Lan has half the picture already in place: A window is opening that enables me to see in a new way. The aggressively helpful part of me has never experienced this so cannot understand. The implication is: I have grown beyond that part. Figure 1 is the intuition that jumped to my mind from everything Ji-Lan had brought forward up to this point in working with this dream, from the previous dreams she had worked on in the group, and from what had emerged from her
daughter’s dreams in the other dream group. It seemed this was the dream Ji-Lan had been working towards ever since she joined the group. An excitement ran through the group as everyone waited for Ji-Lan’s next words.

They were:

*I want to read more Chinese history.*

She takes the metaphor of book as window into a new way of seeing and being – that points perhaps to a wonderful personal transformation – and reifies it into a literal representation of book as authoritative Yi-Guan Dao gospel, along the lines of what she had said before, “The book mean[s] I need to study.” In doing so she turns away from the rich multi-dimensional (metaphorical) language of dreams, poetry, and lived religious truth and takes up instead the shallow one-dimensional (literal) language of authority and institutional dogma.

Ji-Lan proceeded to reify the dream’s next metaphor as well:

*We admire and respect the White Water Old Man. He has lung problem and should die. But our holy teacher gave him a chance would he want to spread Dao. He said yes and his lung disease recovered. [He] lived for more than 57 years old. When I want to do something for God maybe the bad thing will get away from me. [She mentioned a hip problem she has.] White Water Old Man gave book to me means I have some opportunity to get away from bad things and have new life. I had operation, surgery; cannot sleep well. After returning from America not feel so well, easy to get angry. I just want to have easy way, like when I was younger. Want to be energetic, not sick person. I would rather to help people outside not just stay home to be a sick person.*

The dream’s rich metaphor of the White Water Old Man brings in the possibility of real personality change, and the discovery of a real Yi-Guan Dao. But Ji-Lan does not look at the image as metaphor. She aggressively forces upon it a literal meaning instead – a trite entry-level misinterpretation of religion that can only have been formed back at an earlier stage of her development when she first encountered the White Water Old Man narrative and imagined it to contain the formula:

*Religion = Do something for God so I can get something for myself.*

She pushes this idea onto her dream, not noticing how much more superficial and trite it is than the dream or the religion; and not noticing that it even violates the narrative itself – for the historical White Water Old Man certainly did NOT do what he did in order that “God” would reward him with a healing.

We see that, just as the dream suggests, the pushy, authoritative aspect of Ji-Lan really is in the dark and really does not have a clue. It is as fake as it is ignorant – not just in her but in us all. Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, and the Buddha
all say as much about the conceptual self and its many machinations. The White Water Old Man in Ji-Lan’s own dream conveys the same message by presenting her directly with the book instead of conveying it through the Dao Transmitting Master. The wonderful dream is so small and so crystal clear that the first two metaphors suffice to illuminate the whole.

Not noticing, Ji-Lan plods blindly on in the same literal vein:

_I have been translator when Philippine people come to our temple. Bought lots of books Chinese / English. When I read these books [I am] also making a progress. I can read more truth that help[s] me to purify myself._

_[pause]_

_I will be the great person when I pass away._

_[pause]_

_Maybe I should not limit myself. Maybe I have a chance to be great._

Like religious fundamentalists the world over she is reading “eternal” to mean “forever,” and so forcing upon her thinking a dualism that is not seen to exist in reality by the individual capable of a direct religious epiphany – which can reveal the eternal in the moment, and the afterlife to be that which happens in the here-and-now when one is “reborn” with a heart that transcends the opposition between sacred and profane, and can begin living and acting in a manner that glimpses and honors the sacred in everything and everyone previously seen as profane.

The way she thinks about or believes in her religion is, of course, her own business – except that at this particular moment she happens to be confronted with the imagery of her own dream, which presents quite a different picture than the one she is presuming to be true. In the dream the White Water Old Man is dead, as the Dao Transmitting Master points out. And yet for Ji-Lan in the dream he manages to operate like a living presence, and to open up in her what promises to be a new way of seeing the world and everything in it. What is dead is alive. The (White Water Old Man’s) “afterlife” is happening for her in the dream “right now.”

The group member read the whole rest of the dream back to her: “_She replied, He was dead. You told her, His soul is in somebody’s body and this medium gave the book to you on his behalf. It’s your honor to receive this book from him._”

Ji-Lan says:

_At that moment I feel the Dao Transmitting Master doesn’t believe me. That’s only say was dead [i.e., that she only says that he was dead]. Also means it’s not possible you can be the great person in the future._
She accords some individual sitting up in the Yi Guan Dao hierarchy an
authority over the unknowable mystery of her own innermost unfolding – which
is sacred and cannot be known from outside itself. In pushing Yi Guan Dao
beliefs so aggressively upon herself she loses sight of the real Yi Guan Dao that,
if we are to believe this dream, is already flowering inside her. She misses this
important development by looking for it where it is not to be found.

Confucius would be proud of such blind piety towards established authority as
she evinces. Recall that the evening just before Ji-Lan had the dream, when her
precocious little girl Yu-Li blurted out her misgivings about Confucius – “He is
the man I want to go back and blame him!” – Ji-Lan concocted a specious
argument to dissuade the child from doing any such thing. And then, Ji-Lan’s
last thought as she dozed off to sleep afterwards, the night she had the dream
was, “I think I made a good answer to Yu-Li.” Could it be that this dream arose
in the night from Ji-Lan’s most enlightened inner core to disagree – and reveal
that piety towards traditional authority is not the way to what she seeks; the
real Yi Guan Dao, and everything she needs to transform herself, can be had
by merely dipping down into the deeper levels of her own being?

Ji-Lan’s final words in the playback are not even about the dream but about
proselytizing her religion and the difficulty she experiences in trying to convert
people:

Sometimes when I [am] trying to help people use the way I learn from Dao
society, but I feel difficulty [i.e., but I feel the difficulty of doing this]. Not
everyone agree[s] [regarding] the truth [of] our Dao society. When I
encounter difficulty maybe I stay there or didn’t go forward. [i.e., when I run
up against difficulty maybe it’s because I’ve gotten stuck somehow or ceased
to progress in my cultivation of myself.]

The dream makes no mention of spreading religion to other people. It is about
her own conversion from the superficial worship of outside authority that she
is pushing on herself and everyone else to a realization of that greater truth
which comes as a gift from her innermost enlightenment.

Ji-Lan had finished with her playback. She looked up at me.

I put one final question to her: “In the dream, when you tell the Dao
Transmitting Master it was the White Water Old Man who gave you the book,
she objects that the White Water Old Man is dead…”

Ji-Lan looked at me blankly. She did not get what I was driving at.

“You have to tell her that his soul entered the body of a medium and this
medium gave you the book…” I went on.

Ji-Lan kept staring at me with that same uncomprehending look. She still did
not grasp the point.
I tried to spell it out: “Why would you have to tell her this? She is the Dao Transmitting Master. If anyone should know this is how White Water Old Man works, it is her.”

A light suddenly dawned in Ji-Lan’s eyes. She said:

*Maybe he was dead means I think it’s another test. She wants to know if I have enough wisdom to answer such a question and to prove it if I am qualified to get this gift. In our society we should follow our senior, follow her way.*

“What would make the Dao Transmitting Master think she had a right to test you,” I fired back, “When the plain reality that you possessed the book was clear evidence you had already passed the much higher test of a much higher master and authority than her, the spirit of the White Water Old Man himself, which alone could give you such a book?”

Ji-Lan sat there wrapped in silence. She began to fidget and look uncomfortable. I saw she had gone as far as she could with this dream – and also that she had begun to sense, perhaps from the tenor of my questions, that there was something she was not getting, or that I thought she was not getting. I saw that I had made a mistake by pressing her on this point.

“Would you like to go to the next stage and hear what others think?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

One after another members of the group told what they thought. Finally a woman of about Ji-Lan’s same age, who was not even a member of the university community but worked in a nearby five-star mountain lake resort hotel, came forward. I will call this woman Mu-Ping, although that is not her real name. Mu-Ping had worked with two of her own dreams in the group but she had been exasperatingly close-lipped. Every time anyone put a question to her she sat looking straight at the person and said nothing. At the end she held her cards close to her chest and did not share with us what she thought. “I’ll think about it,” was all she would say. Her dreams, like Ji-Lan’s, had depicted a spiritual ripeness and a life on the cusp of a mid-life transformation. So perhaps it was not surprising that Mu-Ping came forth with a terse but crystal clear take on Ji-Lan’s dream that, in its own simple way, hit on the nerve of the view outlined above and illustrated in Figure 1. Finally, when I spoke I expanded on what Mu-Ping had said. I noticed Ji-Lan fidgeted and became uncomfortable so I stopped

“You have the last word,” I said.

She said:

*At first I don’t think it’s an easy dream to let me understand the true meaning.*

[pause]
I know it’s a big chance for me to start my new change.

The dream group had come to a close.

DID JI-LAN GET HER DREAM WRONG?

Ji-Lan is only one individual and has only one life, one family, one job, and one religious affiliation. But two different influences (Figure 2) struggle to play themselves out at this point in that one life, that one family, that one job, and that one religion. In working with her dream in the group she gets hopelessly tangled between the two. She started out working with the dream one way, switched to working with it another way, and ended up grabbing at straws to try to make sense of it.

Does it follow that she got the dream wrong? Only if the assumption (Figure 1) is that only one of those two narratives represents Ji-Lan’s true story. But Figure 2 shows that this is not the case. It is the tangle that reflects who she is—and it is the tangle that the dream so aptly depicts. To get it right, to be truthful to the dream, and to act the dream’s truth out in the presence of the dream group, Ji-Lan had to get tangled up like she did.

DEEPER CURRENTS AT WORK

Only by truthfully showing and being who she is, can a dreamer possibly change. What the dreamer may come to see or know, recognize or
conceptualize, by working with her dream does not matter as much. The paradox at work in the Ullman process is that when a dreamer reveals to the group where she is stuck – with her dream, with her life, with her self – she unknowingly releases the very deepest currents of healing that alone can set her life in motion again. This is why so often in the dream group it is the big failure that may produce the big success, the dream gotten badly wrong that in the end may be the catalyst to make the dreamer’s life go powerfully right.

The Ullman dream group is an environment where, standing naked in a sense before others, a dreamer can truthfully be herself in the presence of what is even more truly and nakedly herself than she is – her dream. Transformation does not come about by a dreamer’s ability to intellectually see and express in language what her dream or behavior in the group reveals. To see intellectually and express verbally, so useful out in society, is not a human’s greatest capability. Rather, as Ralph Waldo Emerson gleaned so long ago (Emerson, 1841/1936), and as all the wisdom traditions have told us from the earliest times, the intellectual self labors in the service of a higher faculty. This higher faculty is our most essential nature and, just as all our other faculties – the body has its playground and gym, the intellect its library and university, the creative spirit its film studio and art center – this highest faculty of ours needs an environment where it can come out and express and refine itself and discover itself and connect with itself in others; and form a community with them in which it is free to evolve and emerge. The earliest local gatherings of all the great religions once served as such environments – but these religions were bent by lesser individuals over the centuries to the lesser purposes they mostly serve today. The Ullman dream group is an ideal modern secular environment for the emergence and expression of the highest human faculty. Its advantage is that a dream, and not some intermediary person, body of persons, or ideology, governs the process. This is as it should be for every dream is a direct spontaneous and unconscious expression of this highest faculty. The moment the dreamer bends the dream to lesser purposes then in so doing she nakedly reveals the part of herself that needs to be seen so it can be healed. Individual by individual we heal in this way a society that has grown sick throughout and has ceased to function in a way that maximizes human potential all around.

We might fault a dreamer’s failure to see intellectually or express verbally what a specific dream “means.” But as to the higher faculty at work in the process and the methods deployed in that task – it is not for us to judge what we cannot know. This level of the work with dreams is not about knowing.

**Still Deeper Currents**

In stepping all over her dream’s toes the way she does, Ji-Lan dances with it in the only way she knows how – and truthfully reveals to all present who she really is and how she steps on her own toes and those of everyone she gets close to with her pushy authoritarianism. To one extent or another we are all of us bad dancers like her, and we all of us do to ourselves and others what she does. So a truth, a teaching, a touching story, is revealed in the group that
illuminates not just her, but others in the group as well. And herein lies yet another healing current of the Ullman group, and yet another powerful way it releases the higher faculty. Somehow in spite of Ji-Lan’s understandings or misunderstandings, or our own, we in the group come inevitably, as the result of working with her dream, to appreciate her in a deeper way. We cannot help it. We have been given a glimpse of the greatness in her, even though she herself may remain blind to it. We see it in her because she has made us know it in ourselves. Her dream brings us Figure 1 and we recognize in it who we really are. And so the group as a whole is brought closer together in appreciation of what is most real in us all. The group owes this to her. She cannot help but feel its gratitude and its increased esteem for her. She responds with unimaginable growth. Her growth is not for us to dictate. It may not even be for us to know. We can only appreciate the capacity for it in her, and by doing that we do not just share in that capacity – but we actually provide the environment for it to begin to unfold its fruits – not just in her, but in others as well.

Mu-Ping, the woman about Ji-Lan’s same age who worked in the hotel and was so tight-lipped when she worked with her own dreams, stopped coming to the group sometime after Ji-Lan’s dream. She reappeared the very last day the dream group met and told us that she had spent much time thinking about the last dream she did in the group and she had talked the dream over with her husband. She said she knew she had not been forthcoming in the dream group but that as a result of what the group did with her second dream, and because of being in the dream group, she had quit her job, withdrawn her daughter from a prestigious and expensive boarding school and brought her home. Before going out to find a job that better suited her, she was taking off the entire summer. She had signed up for a seven-day meditation retreat at a nearby Buddhist temple and was spending the whole rest of the summer with her daughter. She said in the fall she would enroll her in a regular school nearby, perhaps the one Ji-Lan’s daughter attended.

Did Ji-Lan’s openness and honesty about her life, the powerful images of her dream, or the way she showed herself to be stuck, somehow help nudge Mu-Ping in the direction of making such significant moves in her life? I do not doubt it. It takes a certain weight of truth to release any life into motion. A single individual alone may not be able to come up with quite what is needed, but in the Ullman group supporting truths of the deepest sort emerge abundantly from the other individuals as they work on their dreams.

Despite what most people think, the Ullman dream group is not primarily about what individual members can get from their dreams, though they derive much. It is really about what they can give to others in the group by sharing their dreams and the truth of their lives, whether or not they themselves get anything from the experience. When that vein of truth that lies deep down within each and every one of us is opened up to any degree at all, or even scratched at, someone in the group is bound to go away transformed, changed, or deepened to some degree. Whether or not the dreamer is the one potentiated to transform is of little importance compared to the certainty that someone in the group will be, whether the group ever finds out about it or not. This is the
transpersonal junction of the process and in this deepest sense of the work with dreams, Ji-Lan certainly got her dream right. Nothing else really matters.

We do not guide this Ullman process and we are not in the group to heal or change the dreamer. The dreamer is the one who guides the process. If she is honest, if she is open—if she is willing to let herself show us who she is (and Ji-Lan was all these things); and if, in addition, she engages in the difficult art of grappling in our presence with an interesting and profound dream (like Ji-Lan did) then she activates in our midst that which joins us all deeply and thus has the power to unite us with what is more true in ourselves. This coming alive in our presence operates like a charged field which can transform human life, move it closer to its real measure. If it is her own life that moves or does not move, or the life of someone else in the group – if no one’s life is transformed at all, or if someone’s is – does not matter. She got to that point, and getting there she brought us with her. She went as far as she could. She touched a vein that throbbed also in our lives. She did it in a way that was open and true. Perhaps something always happens when this occurs, something we cannot so easily see. This particular time something happened that we could easily see; but it happened to another person, not her. Since she did it, how can we not view her work with the dream as successful?

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

What follows is a brief summary and explanation of the stages, processes, and necessary skills that distinguish the structured group process for working with dreams that Montague Ullman, M.D. developed with psychiatric interns in Sweden in the 1970s and that he honed and perfected during the next twenty years in America with mixed groups containing professionals and lay persons. Over the years the method has been field tested with mothers of young children on Long Island, NY (Dodd, 1999); with pastoral counseling groups in the Church of Sweden in Scandinavia (Hedenrud, 1999); and with groups from a wide variety of other contexts (Ullman & Limmer, 1999). In Taiwan the method has been field tested with undergraduates at an elite medical university (Chiang & Lin, 2004), with counseling professionals and others (Wang, 2008), and with university faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates (Stimson, 2009b, 2010; Stimson & Wang, 2004).

**The skills necessary in the Experiential Dream Group.**

There are two skills involved:
1. **Listening:** The main challenge for most people is to put all of their own brilliant ideas to one side, disregard them utterly, and listen purely and simply to what the dreamer is saying. This is not easy for people in general and it is not easy for people who have been trained in the helping professions. Frequent mistakes beginners make include

(a) *Cutting a dreamer off when she is speaking to introduce an idea of their own.* It is hard for people to realize their own ideas do not matter and that nothing is more important than what the dreamer herself has to say.

(b) *Offering supposedly helpful suggestions when a dreamer struggles to find a way to express herself.* Putting words in the dreamer’s mouth is not helpful. When the dreamer opens her mouth and is silent, what we want to hear is not what someone else in the group supposes she is about to say next. We want to hear the words that come when the dreamer finally does find a way to express herself. In the experiential dream group we put up with silence for longer, sometimes, than many people are comfortable with. It is the same with tears and laughter. More often than not they signal that something has gone right – not wrong. We do not try to rush forward and comfort the dreamer unless we are invited to do so. The group functions instead to open the dreamer up to self-expression and to allow that expression.

(c) *Disregarding what the dreamer says because they feel they know better than the dreamer what the dream is about.* Usually the dreamer knows much more than she realizes she knows. The highest skill is to listen to what the dreamer says but does not hear herself say and then share with her what you have heard. In other words, each of us in the group is called upon to listen to the dreamer even more closely than she listens to herself. This is a tall order. Most people simply cannot get away from their own brilliant ideas long enough to really hear what the dreamer is saying.

2. **Knowing how to ask a question:** In this kind of dream group we do not allow any group member to take control away from the dreamer. The dreamer alone determines the extent to which she wishes to open up to the group, what information she is willing to offer to the group, and in what direction she chooses to take the process. Consequently:

(a) **No information demanding questions are allowed.** “What were your feelings when your parents died?” is an “information-demanding question” – a question that demands the dreamer provide an answer. This kind of question intrudes into the dreamer’s private domain and is not permitted. Instead, we ask “information-eliciting questions.” “Is there anything more you would care to say about how you felt during this period?” is a proper question. It demands nothing of the dreamer but is an invitation for her to say anything else that comes to mind. Thus, it functions to elicit information. An open-ended question like this gives the dreamer the freedom to
follow her own inner promptings. She stays in control and leads the process.

(b) **No “leading questions” are allowed.** “Don’t you think that little old lady in the dream was your mother?” is a leading question. A leading question is a hypothesis introduced under the guise of a question. It takes control of the process away from the dreamer and subjects the inquiry into the dream to the preconceptions of a group member. Such questions will be stopped immediately.

(c) **No questions are allowed about areas of her life not already introduced by the dreamer.** The dreamer may have a boyfriend but she said nothing about him at all. No one may ask about the boyfriend or any other piece of information unless the dreamer introduces it first. The very crux of this process is that the dreamer alone controls the level of sharing. Of course if she shares almost nothing at all, she will get very little of value out of the process. It is in the nature of the group work that there is an inevitable tradeoff between the safety factor and the discovery factor. A dreamer who makes herself completely safe might discover very little. On the other hand a dreamer who discovers a lot might not feel entirely safe. Only the dreamer can decide what balance to strike.

### The Stages of the Process

The creative process, whether it be the opening of a flower, the growth of a child or the writing of a novel, happens in discrete stages. At each stage something needs to happen in order for the next stage to kick in successfully. The Experiential Dream Group is a succession of very different stages that serve to keep the dream and the dreamer opening more and more fully to each other throughout the entire process. The group has no other agenda.

**Obtaining a dream:** No one in the group is obliged to offer a dream. The group leader invites anyone who wishes to share their dream with the group to come forward. If two or three people volunteer, then the leader sits back while those individuals decide among themselves which one feels a more pressing need to do their dream. In the case where more than one individual wants to do their dream, a coin is tossed.

“When did you have this dream?” the leader asks before the dreamer tells her dream. To know when the dream occurred is necessary for a future stage in the process.

**Stage I:** The dreamer tells the dream slowly as members of the group write it down. Members of the group may then ask clarifying questions. Common questions are “What were the feelings in the dream?” “Were there any colors in the dream?” “Were you your present age?” “Were any of the people in the dream real people?” The questioning should not go on too long. It is important that the group have an accurate picture of the dream in their minds. But to try
to get too precise is a waste of time. Dreams, by their very nature, are vague and hard to pin down exactly.

**Stage II:** The leader invites the dreamer to sit back, listen and take notes. He instructs the group to ignore the dreamer, not to make eye contact or speak to her. The group starts playing “the game.” Each member pretends the dream is her own.

There are two parts to this stage: feelings and metaphor.

1. **Feelings:** Any member of the group who wishes to, speaks up and expresses the feeling that she has during a certain scene in the dream or because of a particular image. “The dark cloud makes me afraid,” one group member may say. Another might follow, “The dark cloud makes me laugh because it looks so stupid.” A third member might say, “The dark cloud makes me angry.” These are all only projections. Nobody but the dreamer can know what the dark cloud ultimately means. This stage functions to offer the dreamer a multitude of possibilities. Often the dreamer will have no clue at all why the dark cloud was in her dream. It may be something a group member says that’s completely wrong that finally gives her the clue. “No. I was not afraid. That’s the thing. I realize it now. I felt in the dream the dark cloud was not real. I didn’t believe it.”

2. **Metaphors:** After the feelings in the dream have been sufficiently fleshed out the leader asks the group to shift gears and begin looking at the images of the dream as metaphors. “I feel the dark cloud is a metaphor for camouflage, like a squid’s ink,” one group member may say. “It’s hiding something.” Another member may say, “I feel the dark cloud is a metaphor for me finally showing my feelings – revealing out in the open what was there all along.” These metaphors, like the feelings, are only projections. They’re very useful because they open up the dreamer’s own imagination. The dreamer might decide, “The dark cloud that was blowing past was a powerful metaphor for everything in the situation that has nothing whatsoever to do with me. I just stood there and it went right by. I didn’t need to get involved. And that’s the attitude I need to take with this impossible situation I’ve described at work.”

**Stage III:** When the dream images have been sufficiently fleshed out, the leader thanks the group for its help and invites the dreamer to come forward and comment on the dream in light of all the different possibilities that surfaced during the “game.”

1. **Dreamer’s Response:** This is a time when the dreamer can say anything she wants about anything. She can talk for as long as she wishes and can remain quiet and think for as long as she wants before starting to speak again. The only thing she has to do is tell the group when she is finished, when she has said everything she has to say. The leader asks the dreamer, “Would you like to go on to the next stage?” The dreamer is in control of the process and can stop it at any point if she
feels threatened or unsafe. If the dreamer does feel safe within this process then she will opt to go forward with the exploration of the dream.

(2) The Dialogue between the Dreamer and the Group: At each previous stage of the process either the dreamer or the group has been active. During the dialogue the group and the dreamer interact.

(a) Search for Context: The group now questions the dreamer about the real-life events leading up to the dream (Open-ended questions only! No leading questions! No questions on material the dreamer has not already introduced!) “Could you say anything about what was going through your mind as you were going to sleep that night?” is a good start. From there the group stretches the timeframe slowly back to include the evening and then the entire day. It is sometimes helpful to stretch the timeframe back further to include the past several days, the entire week, the month, or even “this general period of your life.”

(b) The Playback: When enough of the context has been fleshed out, then the leader asks the dreamer if she wishes to continue with the work on the dream and go to the next stage. If the dreamer says yes, then someone in the group reads the dream, scene by scene, back to the dreamer in the second person (“You saw a big black cloud on the horizon, etc.”). The dreamer is asked to relax and view each successive scene of the dream as if it were a film on a screen. The purpose here is to put a distance between the dreamer and her dream so she can sit back and, in light of everything that has been said so far about the dream images and about her recent life, look at the dream in a fresh way. The dreamer can interrupt at any moment to offer any new insights or connections that arise. Also the group members can bring to the dreamer’s attention any discrepancies between the waking feelings and the imagery of the dream. Or, the dreamer may be invited to look deeper into the dream imagery or deeper into the events of the day. The dreamer may simply be asked to notice some peculiarity of an image in the dream that comes to light now. “You say the dark cloud in your dream was not black. It was purple,” some member of the group might say, holding the image up to the dreamer. “Yes,” the dreamer might suddenly say, “At work my boss always wears purple.”

The playback is a powerful stage. The imagery of the dream has been explored; the recent emotional experience of the dreamer has come to light. In the playback these two come naturally together, like two tributaries, to make a mighty river. The dreamer, the group, and the leader all play active roles in this stage. This is the time when the dreamer and her dream often open to each other and connect.

(c) The Orchestration: The leader asks the dreamer if she wishes to go to the next stage. If she says yes, the leader invites any members of the group who wish to come forward now and offer the dreamer their view of what the dream is saying. This affords each member of the group the only chance they’ll have to tell the dreamer what they think the dream means. Now they can say something like “I think your dream of the dark cloud means that your boss has made such a big
stink over this situation that everybody in the company sees what she is now. She’s not going to stay in that position for long. The dream suggests your best bet is not to do anything. You are safe.”

The “views” the various group members come up with are called “orchestrating projections” because they attempt to “orchestrate” or bring together in a harmonious way all the disparate and discordant bits of information that have come forward during the process and because they are only projections. Nobody can know what somebody else’s dream means. The dreamer, by this stage, often pretty well knows what her dream means, and so it might be useful to her to see what other people think.

(d) The dreamer has the final word: Symbolically and factually, it is important that in this process the dreamer has the final word. The leader invites the dreamer to say anything more she cares to say. Almost always the dreamer says something like, “I just want to thank all of you so much!” or “I never imagined that such a simple little dream could mean so much and be so important to me!”

The real dream work does not actually go on in the group but in the dreamer’s own privacy after she leaves the group. The images, ideas and events raised in the group keep working together, like the ingredients in a cake that is slowly baking. The insight as to the deepest import of the dream might spark in the shower the next morning, or on the way to work two days later. And so, in an ongoing group, there is one final stage to the process.

(e) At the next group meeting, the dreamer is invited to share any further ideas or insights about the dream. It sometimes comes out that the dream was about something completely different than everybody thought and that some little thing that happened later caused the dreamer to realize its true meaning. This is an opportunity for the dreamer to share this with the group.

The Author

William R. Stimson trained for many years under Montague Ullman, M.D., who originated the Ullman experiential dream group process. At Ullman’s instigation he began leading dream groups himself in New York City. When he followed his wife, Dr. Shuyuan Wang, to Taiwan, together with her, he introduced the Ullman dream group as a course at the university. Besides his ongoing work with the dream group at National Chi Nan University, he leads monthly all-day dream groups in Taiwan’s three major cities that are open to anyone and free of charge. His signal achievement in Taiwan is that he has discovered so many individuals who are better at dreams than he is. It is the work of these unknown “dream geniuses” that he tries to do justice to in his research papers on dreams.
SPONTANEOUS AWAKENING EXPERIENCES: BEYOND RELIGION AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT: ‘Awakening experiences’ have been misunderstood to some degree by their long association with religious and spiritual traditions and practices. The research reported here – 161 reports of awakening experiences – suggests that most of them occurred outside the context of spiritual or religious traditions. Neither were they induced by spiritual practices such as meditation or prayer. Most occurred ‘spontaneously.’ As a result, they are termed here ‘spontaneous awakening experiences.’ Many activities and situations can be seen as having a certain degree of ‘awakening potential,’ capable of inducing – or at least being the context for – awakening experiences. Many are psychological in origin, although they may be interpreted in religious terms. Perhaps the term ‘spiritual experience’ should be applied only to awakening experiences related to – or triggered by – spiritual practices. I suggest a more neutral term (‘awakening experiences’) to describe them. A psychological/energetic view of awakening experiences is presented which provides a framework for understanding spontaneous awakening experiences.

The word ‘spiritual’ is difficult to use with any precision, because it has so many diverse meanings to different people. In everyday speech, when someone says ‘She’s such a spiritual person,’ it could be interpreted in a variety of ways: that the person believes in ghosts and goes to séances; that she follows the teachings of a religion and goes to church or the mosque every week; that she has healing crystals in the bathroom, goes to see a Reiki healer and reads books about channelling and angels; or that she is calm and humble, generous and compassionate, rather than materialistic or status-seeking. Noting this plethora of meanings, Wilber has written, ‘the real difficulty…is getting almost anyone to agree with what we call ‘spiritual.’ The term is virtually useless for any sort of coherent discussion” (1997, p. 221).

The same applies to the term ‘spiritual experience.’ I have found that some people believe the term refers to a psychic or paranormal experience, while others use the term with a purely religious meaning (e.g., religious visions, ‘hearing’ the voice of God or Jesus).

The term ‘mystical experience’ is problematic too. The terms ‘spiritual’ and ‘mystical’ experience are sometimes used interchangeably (e.g. James, 1985; Hardy, 1979), or elsewhere ‘mystical experiences’ are seen as an especially intense form of spiritual experience (Underhill, 1960; Happold, 1986; Marshall, 2005). However, the terms ‘mystical experience’ and ‘mystic’ are most commonly used by religious scholars (particularly in the Christian tradition), referring to ‘spiritual experiences’ or to individuals who have reached a high...
level of ‘spiritual development’ in the context of religion (so that Happold [1986] and Underhill [1960], for example, refer to the ‘Great mystics’ such as St. John of the Cross and St. Theresa). It is more unusual for transpersonal or humanistic psychologists to use the term ‘mystical’ (an exception is Hood [1975], with his use of the term mysticism in his ‘M-scale.’).

A further issue with the term ‘mystical’ is its meaning in popular discourse. For Happold and Underhill, a ‘mystic’ is a person who has managed to expand and intensify his or her normal consciousness, and so has a more intense and truer vision of reality, and a new relationship to the world – including an awareness and sense of connection to the divine. However, in popular discourse, the term ‘mystical’ is often used to refer to transgressing the boundaries of modern science or reason, as with phenomena such as alien abductions, astrology or crystal healing.

Maslow’s term ‘peak experience’ is more satisfactory. Maslow also recognized that the experience was “often stimulated by non-religious settings and activities” so that “the framework by which we interpret our experience must encompass everyday life - beyond the realm of ‘religion’” (1970, p. 170). However, the breadth of term ‘peak experience’ is slightly problematic, possibly referring not only to spiritual or mystical experiences, but also to non-spiritual experiences of well-being, such as the feeling of achieving a long-sought goal, overcoming challenges or obstacles, appreciating what is normally taken for granted, skills mastery, profound musings and unforgettable dreams (Hoffman & Ortiz, 2009). Certainly, some of the examples Maslow gives of ‘peak experiences’ – e.g., a young drummer who had three peaks when he felt that his performance was perfect, a dinner party hostess who had a peak experience at the end of a perfect evening (Maslow, 1962) – are not what would normally be considered ‘spiritual experiences.’ These may be experiences of flow, deep happiness, relief or appreciation but they do not appear to involve the shift in perception, the sense of revelation, meaning and connection or unity which spiritual or mystical experiences bring.

The term I would like to employ is ‘awakening experiences.’ This term recognizes that in these moments our awareness and perception become more intense and expansive than normal. There is a sense of stepping beyond the normal limitations – or filters – of our normal consciousness, bringing a sense of clarity, revelation and well-being in which we become aware of a deeper (or higher) level of reality (Taylor, 2010). For the purposes of this article, I am defining an awakening experience as

An experience in which our state of being, our vision of the world and our relationship to it are transformed, bringing a sense of clarity, revelation and well-being in which we become aware of a deeper (or higher) level of reality, perceive a sense of harmony and meaning, and transcend our normal sense of separateness from the world.

The term implies that this state is more intense and expansive than our ‘normal’ one. Different intensities of awakening experiences exist, and different characteristics emerge at the varying degrees of intensity. A ‘low intensity’
awakening experience may be a sense of heightened awareness, that one’s surroundings have become more real, with qualities of ‘is-ness’ and ‘alive-ness.’ A ‘medium intensity’ awakening experience may include a powerful sense that all things are pervaded with – or manifestations of - a benevolent and radiant ‘spirit–force,’ so that they are all essentially one; and the individual may feel part of this oneness, realizing that they are not a separate and isolated ego. While in a high intensity awakening experience, the whole material world may dissolve away into an ocean of blissful radiant spirit-force, which the individual feels is the essence of the universe, and of their own being; he or she may feel that they are the universe (Hardy, 1979; James, 1985; Taylor, 2010; Underhill, 1960).

**Awakening Experiences Outside Religious and Spiritual Traditions**

Scholars of mysticism with a religious orientation have a tendency to claim awakening experiences for religion, as if they can only occur through the grace of God, or must at least include a revelation or vision of the divine. This is exemplified by the exclusivity of Fritjof Schuon (in Brown, 1980), who doubted that mystical experiences could occur outside what he called ‘the great orthodox traditions’ (if they did, they would be ‘inoperative, and even dangerous’) and Zaehner (e.g., 1972), who believed that only theistic mystical experience was truly valid, and that even awakening experiences induced by natural surroundings were false and misleading. This division is closely linked to dualistic attitudes of monotheistic religions, where the spirit is pitted against the flesh, and the sacred against the profane.

In a similar way, spiritual traditions such as Vedanta, Yoga and Buddhism tend to isolate the ‘spiritual’ from – and privilege it over – other aspects of existence, creating a duality between the spirit and the body, or between nirvana and samsara. Transpersonal psychology has been heavily influenced by these traditions and so often assumes a similar stance, paying little attention to awakening experiences occurring outside the domain of such traditions.

In this article I suggest that the apparent close association of ‘awakening experiences’ (or what are traditionally called ‘spiritual experiences’) with religious and spiritual practices is misleading. This is not, of course, to say that awakening experiences cannot occur in a religious context. Traditional religions involve certain practices and lifestyle guidelines – such as prayer, contemplation, meditation, yoga and acts of service and self-sacrifice – which clearly facilitate awakening experiences. There are a great many reports of awakening experiences induced by these practices, as well as instances of long term spiritual development occurring as a result of the spiritual paths and practices such as Yoga, Tantra, the eightfold path of Buddhism and the Christian monastic tradition (e.g., Hardy, 1979, Taylor, 2010; Underhill, 1960). To some extent, religious traditions are informed and rooted in awakening experiences. Awakening experiences may be, in Maslow’s term, ‘The Core-Religious Experience,’ which is shared by all great religions including ones like Buddhism, Taoism, Humanism, or Confucianism’ (1970, p. 28).

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However, findings from my own research (Taylor, 2010, 2011, 2012), and that of others discussed below, revealed that a great majority of awakening experiences were not generated by spiritual or religious practices. Rather, the majority of the experiences occurred accidentally or spontaneously. They may be termed ‘spontaneous awakening experiences.’

For example, there are a large number of reports of such experiences apparently caused by – or at least occurring in the context of – sport and exercise (e.g., Murphy & White, 1995; Parry, Nesti, Robinson & Watson, 2007). The primary purpose of sport might be exercise, enjoyment or competition, but it seems that, as a secondary effect, it can serve as a kind of ‘spontaneous awakening practice.’ As Parry et al. (2007) suggest, the desire for transcendent experiences may be one of the reasons why we play and participate in sports. (I am using the term ‘awakening practice’ to refer to any activity or practice undertaken with the aim of generating awakening experiences, or of developing and establishing the characteristics of the ‘awakened’ state on a permanent basis. However, when an activity has a strong tendency to generate awakening experiences, even if the participant does not undertake it with the conscious aim of generating doing this, it can be termed a ‘spontaneous awakening practice.’)

Similarly, Jenny Wade (2000, 2004) has collected many examples of awakening experiences occurring during or after sex, while DeMares & Krycka (1998) found that encounters with wild animals could generate awakening experiences. Collections of experiences by Hardy (1979), Laski (1961), Johnson (1960) and Hoffman (1992) provide many examples of awakening experiences induced or triggered by natural surroundings, art, music and general relaxation. Maslow (1970) suggested that peak experiences are most often associated and achieved through sex, music, and nature. These activities – contact with nature, contemplating works of art, listening to music, sex – can also serve as ‘spontaneous awakening practices.’

In his analysis of the thousands of experiences collected by his Religious Experience Research Unit, Hardy (1979) found that only 13.5% were apparently triggered by conscious spiritual practice (prayer or meditation). A further eleven per cent were also triggered by ‘participation in religious worship,’ which could also be seen as a type of spiritual practice. The highest frequency trigger identified by Hardy was ‘depression and despair’ (18%), while other significant ones were ‘natural beauty’ (12.2%), ‘literature, drama, film’ (8.2%), illness (8%) and music (5.6%). The great majority of the triggers identified by Hardy were accidental or spontaneous.

Rhea White’s research into ‘Exceptional Human Experiences’ also emphasized the wide range of activities which can be the source of awakening experiences. ‘EHE’ is an umbrella term for an expansive range of anomalous experiences, only some of which are ‘awakening experiences.’ (For example, White & Brown [2011] included such experiences as crop circle encounters, déjà vu, encountering fairies, firewalking and haunting.) Nevertheless, the authors (2011) noted a clear trend that many EHEs, which would once have been
associated with religion, were now “being experienced by more people in the midst of daily life.” They suggested that “this may be not so much because these experiences are becoming secularized, but because the sacred is being found in the midst of daily life.”

**MY OWN RESEARCH**

As a part of the research for my book *Waking From Sleep* (Taylor, 2010), I collected 161 reports of awakening experiences from three sources: a class I taught, an invitation on my website, and workshops I conducted.

For four semesters, I taught courses on Positive Psychology to adults in the extra-mural department at the University of Manchester. I taught a session on Maslow’s ‘peak experiences,’ asking the students to write a description of the most powerful such experience they had had. Most of the students gave me reports of awakening experiences – as opposed to other possible types of peak experience – and I collected more than 60 experiences in this way. Following this process, I put a note on my website, reading “Have you ever had an awakening experience? This could be an experience in which your surroundings have become brighter and more real, when you’ve felt a sense of connection to them and a deep sense of well-being inside. Or perhaps you have felt a sense of harmony and meaning pervade the world, even a kind of ‘spirit-force’ pervading all things, and a sense that all things are one, and you are part of this one-ness. The experience may have left you with a sense that ‘all is well,’ that life is more meaningful and benevolent than you thought. If you have had such an experience, please contact me…” Finally, a number of the reports were collected at two workshops I ran in the lead up to the publication of *Waking from Sleep*.

In this way, 161 individuals reported one awakening experience each. The reports are mostly fairly short, with several sentences describing the situation where the experience occurred, and the characteristics of the experience. Few of them were longer than a page of lined paper. For example, here are three reports given me by my students:

I was swimming in a friend’s lake in Canada (Cedar Lake). I felt as though I was the only person there, the only person in the world. I swam out as far as I could, to the middle of the lake and just looked round, treading water. I could see no houses, no people, no cars or roads. I could hear no noise, just my arms splashing. I felt completely alone, but part of everything. I felt at peace in a way. All my troubles disappeared and I felt in harmony with nature. It only lasted a few minutes but I remember a sense of calmness and stillness and it soothes me now.

We were dancing outside on a beautiful day, surrounded by the hills. As we were dancing I started to feel as if it wasn’t me who was doing it anymore. I didn’t have to think. It was just dancing me, and it was the best I ever danced. I felt like I was just a channel for the music. Everything fell into place with the other members of the group. We weren’t individuals
anymore; we were whole body of six people. There was no division between
us. I felt an expansion of awareness into space. I was dancing in the space in
the middle of the hills. I was part of this vast background.

My marriage was breaking up and I was in a state of stress and despair. I rang
the rector of my church in Cheadle (strongly evangelical) for help. He listened
and listened as I poured out my heart to him. After some time he said “You
are claiming your rights!” I responded in horror “Am I?” not really knowing
what he meant – his voice was neither positive nor negative towards me. I
feared the worst! There was a spinning sensation in my head and the top of my
head seemed to open up – I felt a sense of being one with the universe. There
was a silence between us for some time but I felt “He” (God) was still there. I
finished the call and walked into the kitchen and was amazed to see the time –
I thought I had been on the phone for say 10 minutes. But the clocked showed
it was half an hour later.

I quoted from many of these reports in my book *Waking from Sleep* (2010), but
only analysed them systematically for the purposes of this article. Here I
performed a thematic content analysis of them (Creswell, 2007), focusing on
their apparent triggers or the context in which they occurred, and whether they
appeared to be spontaneous or consciously induced. In most cases, the analysis
was fairly straightforward, as the experiences were described directly and
clearly, with the triggers or contexts clearly evident.

**RESULTS**

Tables 1 and 2 show the apparent triggers of the awakening experiences, and
the frequency of their occurrences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trigger/cause</th>
<th>Number of occurrences (n=161, one report per individual)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological turmoil (e.g., stress, depression loss, bereavement)</td>
<td>38 (23.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>29 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meditation</td>
<td>21 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching or listening to an arts performance (e.g., a dance performance, music, play)</td>
<td>21 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HD (homeostasis disruption) states, where pronounced physiological changes result in awakening experiences (Taylor, 2010)</td>
<td>17 (10.6%), of which:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8 drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 sleep deprivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 fasting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in creative performance (e.g., playing music, dancing)</td>
<td>7 (4.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic activity (e.g., running, swimming)</td>
<td>7 (4.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading spiritual literature</td>
<td>4 (2.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>3 (1.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer</td>
<td>3 (1.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No discernible trigger</td>
<td>11 (6.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 161</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Findings revealed the same ‘top three’ triggers identified by Hardy’s research, discussed earlier, although in slightly different order. The most frequent trigger was ‘psychological turmoil’ (23.6%), equivalent to the most frequent trigger identified by Hardy: ‘depression and despair’ (18%). The second and third most important triggers in my research were ‘meditation’ (13%) and nature (18%). In Hardy’s research, ‘natural surroundings’ was the second most important trigger (18%) and ‘prayer and meditation’ was the third (13.5%).

Aside from the high number of awakening experiences induced by psychological turmoil, what is most striking about these findings is the small number triggered by conscious spiritual practice (21.7%). Over 78% were ‘spontaneous awakening experiences.’ Also striking is the small number of awakening experiences related to prayer (3%). Similarly, only a small number of the experiences were given a religious interpretation by the individuals (only 8%), where they felt that they had encountered God or that God had communicated with them. (The third report quoted above is an example: an experience apparently triggered by psychological turmoil which was given a religious interpretation) Admittedly, this result may not be reliable or representative – religious-minded people (who are likely to interpret awakening experiences in religious terms) would be less likely to see the request for reports of awakening experiences on my website; the same goes for attending my workshops.

Nevertheless, the high incidence of ‘spontaneous awakening experiences’ strongly discredits the view that awakening experiences are only valid in a religious context. Surely awakening experiences become religious by virtue of post-experiential interpretation, through a conceptual application of a religious interpretation to a non-conceptual experience. As a consequence, the inclusion of such experiences under the umbrella term of ‘religious experiences’ (e.g., by Alister Hardy and the Religious Experience Unit) is surely misleading and inappropriate.1

Another reason why the results may not be wholly reliable is fear of disclosing potentially embarrassing experiences. For example, the relatively low incidence of sex as a trigger of awakening experiences here may be due to this factor.

**DISCUSSION**

| Conscious spiritual practices or activities – including meditation (21), prayer (3), reading spiritual literature (4), voluntary sleep deprivation (3), or psychedelic drugs (4) | 35 (21.7%) |
| Spontaneous awakening experiences – including psychological turmoil (38), nature (29), watching or listening to an arts performance (21), homeostasis disruption (10), participating in creative performance (7), athletic activity (7), sex (3), no discernable trigger (11) | 126 (78.3%) |
| Total number of experiences reported | 161 |

*a In these cases of sleep deprivation and psychedelic drugs, the practices were consciously undertaken with a view to inducing awakening experiences. Other cases of sleep deprivation and psychedelic drugs were included in the category of ‘Spontaneous Awakening Experiences,’ as they occurred accidentally.

**TABLE 2**

*Awakening Experiences Resulting from Conscious Spiritual Practice versus Spontaneous Awakening*

Spontaneous Awakening Experiences 79
These results suggest that many – if not all – activities possess a certain degree of ‘awakening potential.’ That is, all activities have some potential to create the conditions which give rise to awakening experiences. This position accords with Wilber’s all-inclusive view of spirituality, with his suggestion that the highest levels of consciousness are accessible at all stages of development, and that the ‘spiritual’ is a part of every line of development (Wilber, 2000). In a similar fashion, it makes sense to assume that the highest levels of consciousness are accessible through a variety of activities and situations – perhaps even all activities and situations. (This is an issue which could be clarified by further research, investigating how frequently awakening experiences occur amongst the participants of a wide range of activities.)

At the same time, it is important to note that there are limits to this relativism. Different activities and situations have varying degrees of awakening potential. Some activities appear to have a high degree of awakening potential, such as contact with nature, meditation, attending an arts performance, sex or certain sports. Other activities – such as shopping or watching television – may only have a small degree of it. However, even these may be the context for an awakening experience. Gackenbach (2008), for example, claims that even playing video games can, under certain circumstances, generate characteristics of higher states of consciousness.

The Sources of Spontaneous Awakening Experiences

What are the conditions which give rise to awakening experiences? In other words, when an activity or situation generates characteristics such as a heightened awareness, an awareness of an all-pervading ‘spirit-force,’ or a sense of oneness with the cosmos, what type of inner or psychological change is being produced, and giving rise to these characteristics?

Aside from the religious view that awakening experiences are a form of divine grace, there is the materialistic view that they can be explained in terms of neurological or biological factors (e.g. Foster, 2011; Newberg, & D’Aquili, 2000; Persinger, 1983). There is also the ‘mysterian’ view that the experiences cannot be explained. Maslow (1970), for example, was of the view that peak experiences occurred accidentally, for no apparent reason, and could not be consciously generated, or explained.

I have suggested elsewhere (Taylor, 2005; 2010) a psychological-energetic theory of awakening experiences, which helps to explain why awakening experiences are so ubiquitous. I will briefly summarize this theory here.

This explanation begins from the standpoint that there are two types of awakening experiences which have distinct sources. The first are high arousal experiences - wild, ecstatic experiences that happen when the normal
physiological balance of our brain and bodies is disrupted. This is why, throughout history, religious adepts have attempted to induce spiritual experiences by fasting, going without sleep, dancing frenziedly, doing breathing exercises, and taking psychedelic drugs. These activities disrupt our normal physiology, changing our body temperature, blood pressure or metabolic rate, and causing dehydration, exhaustion or chemical changes. If this is done in the context of a religious ceremony or tradition, there is a possibility that an awakening experience may result. These awakening experiences are termed ‘HD’ states (homeostasis-disruption). The research reported here, however, suggests that homeostasis disruption is not a particularly common trigger of awakening experiences (only 10.6%).

The second type of awakening experiences are 'low arousal'; more serene and calm states which occur when our inner psychic energy – which may also be termed ‘life-energy,’ ‘vitality’ or ‘the energy of our being’ – becomes intensified and stilled. As a result, I have termed this type of awakening experience an ‘ISLE’ state – ISLE standing for ‘intensification and stilling of life-energy’ (Taylor, 2010).

This connection between awakening experiences and energy relates to Deikman’s suggestion that meditation can induce an intense perception of is-ness and beauty due to a ‘de-automatization of perception.’ Deikman suggests that mystical experiences are ‘brought about by a deautomatization of hierarchically ordered structures that ordinarily conserve attentional energy for maximum efficiency in achieving the basic goods of survival’ (Deikman, 2011). As he sees it, the quietening of mental activity through meditation creates a surplus of attentional energy (or psychic energy, as Deikman also refers to it) which means that there is no longer a need for these structures to conserve energy. As a result, the individual’s perceptions become de-automatized, and he/she develops an intensified awareness of the phenomenal world.

Similarly, Novak (1996) notes that the ‘endless associational chatter’ of the mind monopolises psychic energy, leaving none available for us to devote to what he calls the ‘open, receptive and present-centred awareness’. However, when a person meditates she diverts attention away from the automatized structures of consciousness which produce ‘thought-chatter’. As a result these begin to weaken and fade away, which ‘frees up’ the psychic energy which they normally monopolise. As a result, in Novak’s words, “energy formerly bound in emotive spasms, ego defence, fantasy and fear can appear as the delight of present-centeredness” (Novak, 1996, p.276).

The contemporary spiritual teacher and author Bernadette Roberts makes a similar point when she states that, “the continual movement [of thoughts] inward and outward, back and forward…consumes an untold amount energy that is otherwise left free when the mind is restricted to the now-moment” (Roberts, 1993, p.95). In other words, meditation has the effect of ‘freeing up’ psychic energy by decreasing its normal ‘outflow.’
As this observation suggests, an ISLE state can occur when the ego-mind becomes quiet, conserving the energy normally consumed by thought-chatter. However, there are other factors too. This ‘energy-conversation’ may also occur when the individual’s exposure to external stimuli is reduced (so that less attentional or psychic energy is expended through information processing), and when one is temporarily free of activity or tasks and duties, so that less psychic energy is expended through concentrative effort. A shorthand way of understanding this is to say that under normal circumstances, our psychic energy is largely expended through ‘thought-chatter’, information-processing and concentration. But in a relaxed state of mind, in quiet surroundings and in a relatively inactive mode, these ‘outflows’ of energy may be reduced. There is less cognitive activity, less information processing, and less intense concentration, which may create an inner intensification of energy, and therefore lead to an awakening experience. (See Taylor, 2005 & 2010 for a fuller explanation of how the different characteristics of awakening experiences emerge from the ‘ISLE’ state.)

**Spontaneous ISLE States**

In addition to explaining why meditation can give rise to awakening experiences, this concept of ‘ISLE’ states can be utilised to explain the occurrence of spontaneous awakening experiences. Broadly speaking, these occur when a certain activity or situation has the effect of generating an ISLE state. For this reason natural surroundings are a frequent trigger of awakening experiences (Hardy, 1979; Hay, 1987; Laski, 1961) – the second most important trigger in my own reports, and the third in Hardy’s. The beauty and power of nature may have a similar effect to a mantra in meditation, directing attention away from the chattering of the ego-mind and generating a state of mental quietness. At the same time, when an individual is walking recreationally amongst natural surroundings, there is likely to be a reduced level of concentrative effort and information processing. As a result, an ISLE state may be induced, bringing a sense of inner peace and wholeness and heightened awareness of the phenomenal world. From an intersubjective or participatory point of view, an additional factor here may be the energy which natural surroundings themselves ‘transmit’ to us. Nature itself appears to have a certain quality of purity and serenity which creates a calm, peaceful state of being. The following are two typical natured-induced awakening experiences from my collection:

The sun was setting and I was watching it go down. I felt everything in the world was here, at this moment. The sunlight was so incredibly bright and pure and beautiful, and the whole sky with the clouds and the blue. That blue was the smoothest and purest blue I’ve ever seen. I could see everything about the clouds, as if they had a whole new dimension. It seemed so simple and so right. I felt how easy it would be to be happy.

I was walking along a woodland path at dusk in winter-time, under a canopy of very tall pines and fir trees...The light had already gone from the
woods below, but up above, all the delicate tracery of the tree branches was shading off into a pale grey sky. As I walked down the path, the trees moved against the sky, and suddenly the fact that they were moving only because I was moving seemed to open out into a vision of eternity, for want of a better phrase...Everything had significance, but it meant nothing more (and nothing less) than just what it was. At the same time, the inevitability of it all meant that I knew for sure that nothing really mattered, and for an instant I knew also that I was basically immortal, in the sense that death didn’t mean anything either.

This is also perhaps why ‘watching or listening to an arts performance’ featured as such a prominent trigger of awakening experiences. When listening to music or watching a dance performance, the individual may become mentally quiescent and relaxed, and is exposed to comparatively few external stimuli (aside from the music itself), reducing the normal ‘outflow’ of psychic energy. For example, the following experience occurred while the person was watching a concert performance of Brahms’ 4th symphony:

The first movement just seemed to warm me up in some way. I was listening more keenly, going with the flow of the music. I seemed to be able to shut out any distracting thoughts. The slow movement began and I recognised it as a particularly beautiful one. The magical moment came and suddenly it was like glittering petals of sounds exploded. It was as though the orchestra, the composer, and my spirit, our spirit – the audience’s – were just opening there and then. We were just opening to generous sunshine. It felt as though some flower inside me had been tight shut, was suddenly just able to open wide.

Again, the ‘ISLE’ effect of music may not be the only factor here. From an intersubjective or participatory point of view, part of the ‘awakening potential’ of music may stem from its ability to transmit the qualities of an awakening experience from the composer (or player/singer) to the listener. Pieces of music can express or embody awakening experiences, and if he/she is sensitive enough, the listener can absorb this. (Lancaster [1991] makes a similar point in relation to poetry.)

Similarly, here are two reports of awakening experiences from my students, which both occurred during a dance performance:

20 years ago at the Alhambra Theatre in Bradford, the first time the Alvin Ailey dance group had ever visited the UK. They danced a piece called Revelations – based on gospel stories, using gospel music. I became totally immersed in the performance. I felt in awe of these beautiful bodies – moving in such expressively beautiful ways. I almost felt I was up there with them. I was on a real ‘high’ – and remember a feeling of such happiness, serenity and an appreciation of the human body and the wonderful way it can move.

Attending the swirling Turkish Dervishes performance at the Royal Northern College of Music. It was a very spiritual experience. Room fell
silent, no babies crying, no movement sounds from the audience, only the
gentle swishing sounds of white skirts twirling and the soft sounds of felt
gliding on the stage. A feeling of intense peace and calm, happiness and
tranquillity. Nothing else mattered in the world and outside the room. We
all felt as one – it was a mesmerising experience and unforgettable.

Although apparently not a major trigger (4.3%), the awakening potential of
sport might be explained in similar terms. In particular, solitary sports which
involve long periods of monotonous rhythmic activity – such as running or
swimming – and/or which involve a large degree of contact with nature, appear
to have a great deal of awakening potential. To some degree, this may be due
to homeostasis disruption, since intensive exercise clearly brings significant
physiological changes such as increased heart rate, body temperature and
blood pressure. However, the rhythmic aspect of such activities may serve as a
focusing device, quietening the chattering ego-mind. When the psychiatrist
Thaddeus Kostrulaba started running regularly, he noted that he felt “an odd
shift in feeling…a sense of well-being, a sense of energy.” He relates this to the
use of mantras to induce different states of consciousness, and suggests that
‘the same process occurs in the repetitive rhythm of long-distance running…
Eventually, at somewhere between 30 and 40 minutes, the conscious mind gets
exhausted and other areas of consciousness are activated’ (cited in Murphy &

This observation is perhaps part of the reason for connection between sex and
awakening experiences too. The sheer pleasure of sex can shift our attention
away from the ego-mind, which may fall silent as a result, bringing what D.H.
Lawrence (1973) described as “the strange, soothing flood of peace which
goes with true sex” (p.54). Jenny Wade has written that “sex can take people
to the same realms as trance, meditation, drugs” (Wade, 2000, p. 120). Sexual
awakening experiences may also be related to the ‘unblocking’ or release of
other energy sources within the body. Reports of sexual awakening
experiences often include descriptions of the awakening of new energies. As
Wade describes it, “Some people report strange energies coursing through the
body. Sometimes it starts with a sense that the sexual charge normally rooted
in the genitals is spreading throughout the entire body, lighting it up with
crackling power and fireworks” (Wade, 2004, p. 27). Here, for example, a
woman described to me the awakening experiences she frequently feels during
and after sex:

I feel as if I haven’t got any weight. There’s a warm feeling running all
through my body…Nothing else seems to matter, problems cease to exist, as
if the feeling takes you over so much that there’s no room for anything else.
I feel capable of doing anything…

I also look at things more clearly, look beyond what I usually look at. The
colours seem more distinct; if you look at, say, a tree, you see it for what it
really is, not just as a tree. You see it as nature, not just as an object.
To identify a cause of awakening experiences is tantamount to suggesting that the experiences can be consciously induced. In other words, if the experiences are due to an intensification and stilling of life-energy, then we should be able to consciously induce an ISLE state, and therefore an awakening experience. In theory there is no reason why this should not be possible (again, this position argues against Maslow’s view that peak experiences cannot be consciously generated). ISLE states are normally generated spontaneously, but in theory, if we know that certain conditions facilitate them – and hence lead to awakening experiences – then we would simply need to create those conditions. Of course, simply performing a particular activity or creating a situation which is associated with an ISLE does not guarantee that the state will occur. Obviously, not every meditation practice, every walk in the country or every dance performance induces an ISLE state and leads to an awakening experience. But simply being aware of the connection, and the possibility of the experience occurring, may increase the likelihood of its occurrence.

**Psychological Turmoil as a Trigger of Awakening Experience**

At first sight, it may seem strange that the most frequent trigger of awakening experiences is psychological turmoil (or ‘depression and despair’ in Hardy’s research). Maslow suggested that peak experiences are positively associated with individuals who are balanced, creative, and psychologically healthy (Maslow, 1959), but these findings suggest that the opposite can be the case. Individuals undergoing intense stress, depression or physical illness, or traumatic life events such as bereavement or divorce, may undergo a sudden shift to an experience of serenity and liberation. (White and Brown’s list of potential triggers for EHE’s also includes what the authors describe as “several experiences one would ordinarily seek to avoid: Danger, Death of another, Illness, Loss, Psychotic states, Rejection.”)

The powerful ‘awakening potential’ of psychological turmoil is illustrated by the two following reports from my collection. One woman described to me how, at the age of 20, she became so severely depressed that she had to be admitted to hospital. While there, she picked up a marble which happened to be lying on her bedside cabinet, and started playing with it in her hands. All of a sudden, it was as if the familiar world melted away, replaced by a vision of beauty and perfection. As she describes it:

I saw reality as simply this perfect one-ness. I felt suddenly removed from everything that was personal. Everything seemed just right. The marble seemed a reflection of the universe. All my ‘problems’ and my suffering suddenly seemed meaningless, ridiculous, simply a misunderstanding of my true nature and everything around me. There was a feeling of acceptance and oneness. It was a moment of enlightenment. The euphoria and inexplicable rush of ‘knowledge and understanding’ (it was like suddenly gaining access to a whole new comprehension of what we call ‘reality’) following this episode lasted for days.
Similarly, a man described how he went through a long period of inner turmoil due to confusion about his sexuality, culminating in the breakdown of his marriage. This may have triggered the following awakening experience – according to him, the only one he has ever had:

It was our last family holiday before the break up. We were in Tunisia and went on an excursion down to the Sahara. We went on a camel ride across part of the desert and at the end of the day, I sat on the sand dune watching the sunset. There were quite a few people around but it was as if everyone else disappeared. Everything just ceased to be. I lost all sense of time. I lost myself. I had a feeling of being totally at one with nature, with a massive sense of peace. I was a part of the scene. There was no ‘me’ anymore. I was just sitting there watching the sun set over the desert, aware of the enormity of life, the power of nature, and I never wanted it to end.

As well as triggering temporary awakening experiences, research into ‘post-traumatic growth’ has found that trauma and psychological turmoil can lead to significant personal and spiritual development (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1998). Tedeschi and Calhoun found that individuals became more appreciative of life, more compassionate for the sufferings of others, and more comfortable with intimacy, so that they had deeper and more satisfying relationships. They also developed a more philosophical or spiritual attitude to life, as questions of the meaning or purpose of life became more urgent for them. (Cryder, Kilmer, Tedeschi, & Calhoun [2006] and Lancaster & Palframan [2009] made very similar findings.)

Even more strikingly, intense psychological turmoil may lead to sudden and dramatic psychological transformation (Taylor, 2011, 2012). It may trigger a ‘spiritual emergency’ which, after an initial period of instability, may settle into a more integrated ‘higher’ state of being, in which the characteristics of temporary awakening experiences become established as permanent characteristics (Grof, 1990; Taylor, 2011, 2012). Miller and C’de Baca (2001) interviewed over 50 people who believed they had undergone a sudden spiritual transformation. They found that the majority of the transformations occurred in response to intense unhappiness, or in the midst of tragedy – for example, people who suffered from the post-traumatic effects of childhood abuse, who had been seriously ill, deeply depressed or addicted to alcohol or drugs. (The other cases were apparently the result of a long period of spiritual practice, or had no apparent cause at all.)

These effects demand a very detailed explanation, which is provided elsewhere (Taylor, 2011, 2012). However, stated briefly, the intense ‘awakening potential’ of psychological turmoil is also related – though less directly – to the intensification and stilling of life-energy. When a person is in a state of despair or depression, many of the psychological attachments which they depend upon for their well-being – such as hopes or plans for the future, beliefs about themselves or the world, their sense of status or achievement in life, their
attachment to possessions or other human beings – may be dissolved. This is often the very reason the person is in despair: because the psychological ‘scaffolding’ which supports the ego has fallen away. As a result, the person feels naked and lost, as if their identity has been destroyed. Deprived of its supporting attachments, the ego itself may collapse, leaving a psychological vacuum. In many cases, this is equivalent to a psychotic break, but in other cases, a new self – a more integrated higher self which appears to be latent in many individuals – may arise and emerge into the vacuum, becoming established as a stable, permanent sense of identity.

However, it is also possible to interpret this in terms of a state of intensified and stilled life-energy. Freud (1923/1962) believed that one of the adverse effects of neuroses is the large amount of psychic energy (or libido) they consume, since the psyche has to make a constant effort to keep them repressed. Jung (1928/1988) believed that psychic energy was expended by actual functions such as instinct, desire and attention, and by potential functions such as attitudes and aptitudes. In a similar way, we might say that psychological attachments such as hopes and beliefs or attachment to possessions or other human beings consume and expend psychic energy. On a basic level, the individual has to expend energy to sustain the attachments – for example, they have to make a constant effort to defend their beliefs against other people’s, to maintain their wealth and status, or to maintain the approval of the people whose affirmation they depend upon. But in a more subtle way, these attachments can be seen as psychological forms which are ever-present within the psyche. The self-concept and our sets of hopes and beliefs exist as constructs, even when we are not consciously aware of them and, simply for their existence to be maintained, there has to be an input of psychic energy. There cannot be any form without some energy source which works to maintain that form. In addition, these psychological constructs also disturb our being – or perhaps more accurately, they invade our being, obscuring its real nature, disrupting its stillness.

In states of despair and detachment, therefore, there is a sudden release of a large portion of life-energy, and now that these psychological constructs no longer exist, there is a sudden new clarity and openness of being, and a new sense of wholeness. As a result, our life-energy becomes highly concentrated, and at the same time still, which equates with an awakening experience.

**Conclusion**

Since only a small number of awakening experiences are induced by or associated with spiritual practices, the term ‘spiritual experience’ may be misleading. The great majority of awakening experiences seem to occur accidentally or spontaneously (hence ‘spontaneous awakening experiences’). All activities have a certain degree of ‘awakening potential’ and paradoxically, certain states, situations and activities have more ‘awakening potential’ than spiritual practices themselves. According to this research, the state of psychological turmoil has the greatest awakening potential, followed by

*Spontaneous Awakening Experiences* 87
nature, then (jointly) meditation and watching or listening to an arts performance.

Because of these findings, and because of the confusion relating to the term ‘spiritual’ described above, I believe that the term ‘spiritual experience’ should be used more sparingly, and be replaced with a psychologically more neutral phrase such as ‘awakening experience.’ Perhaps the term ‘spiritual experience’ could be used specifically for awakening experiences which are related to – or triggered by – spiritual practices such as meditation, prayer or yoga. Otherwise it may be, I believe, inappropriate. (One alternative to this would be to expand the remit of the term ‘spiritual,’ to incorporate many everyday activities such as contact with nature, sex, listening to music, contemplating works of art, and so forth. If these activities were seen as fundamentally spiritual – at least under certain circumstances – then the awakening experiences they generate could also be validly termed ‘spiritual experiences.”

This is not to denigrate the importance of spiritual practice. There is not necessarily a direct relationship between spiritual practice and spiritual experience. We do not just meditate in order to attempt to induce awakening experiences. Spiritual practices such as meditation may create gradual cumulative changes to the psyche, which may make awakening experiences more likely to occur, in any situation or activity. At the same time, regular spiritual practice may gradually lead to a stable, continuous awakened state – a state in which many of the characteristics of awakening experiences are continuously present.

The spontaneous occurrence of so many awakening experiences highlights the fallacy of isolating the sacred and the profane, or separating the ‘spiritual’ from – and privileging it over – other aspects of our lives, and other aspects of development. Spirituality should not solely be located within the context of spiritual traditions or the practice of meditation, but within a much wider context – in fact, not within any context at all, but as an all-inclusive and all-pervading facet of all experience in every domain. This view accords with both the ‘participatory’ approach of Ferrer (2002, 2008) and Wilber’s ‘integral’ approach (Wilber, 2000, 2007). Ferrer’s advocacy of ‘participatory’ or ‘embodied’ spirituality aims to transcend dualities such as spirit/body and scared/profane. Wilber’s approach emphasizes that development must occur across all lines, rather than just in the ‘spiritual,’ while at time same time – as previously mentioned – the spiritual can be seen as an aspect of every line of development.

There is nothing abnormal about awakening experiences. They are completely natural, everyday experiences which can – at least to some extent – be consciously induced. They may be interpreted in religious terms, and certain spiritual practices or spiritual paths may make their occurrence more likely (in addition to helping to develop ‘awakened’ characteristics as a permanent state). However, fundamentally, awakening experiences have a psychological origin, and can be explained in psychological-energetic terms.
I believe that, to some degree, the study of mystical experiences has been limited by being associated so strongly with religion. Many prominent scholars of mysticism, such as Evelyn Underhill, R. C. Zaehner and F. C. Happold, had strong Christian beliefs and saw ‘deity mysticism’ – in which the mystic attains union with ‘God’ – as the highest form of mystical experience. They saw other types of awakening experiences, such as samadhi, nature-mysticism or drug-induced experiences, as either inferior or – in the case of drug experiences – false.

These scholars’ beliefs prejudiced them against non-theistic forms of mysticism. As Ninian Smart points out, the only difference between the experience of Indian mystics and Christian mystics is interpretation: “[The theist] already considers that there is evidence of a personal God and Creator; in the silent brightness of inner contemplative ecstasy it is natural (or supernatural) to identify what is found within with the Lord who is worshipped without” (Smart, 1971, p.87).

In particular, these scholars’ religious beliefs may have prejudiced them against drug-induced mystical experiences. Their association of mysticism with God meant that they could not accept that mystical experience might be produced ‘artificially’ by man-made chemicals (i.e., completely without the help of God). For example, as a staunch Catholic, Zaehner was extremely hostile to Aldous Huxley’s claim that mescaline and LSD could give a person access to the same divine reality that Christian mystics were aware of.

Another important aspect of the dissociation of awakening experiences from religion/spiritual traditions is the contribution this makes to the debate regarding perennialism. One of the main arguments of ‘contextualists’ such as Katz (e.g., 1983) is that mystical experiences cannot be divorced from the religious or spiritual traditions in which they occur. As Gimello writes, for example, ‘Mystical experience is simply the psychosomatic enhancement of religious beliefs and values or of beliefs and values which are held ‘religiously’ ’ (1983, p.85). However, if mystical experiences can occur outside religious traditions, in people who have no religious beliefs or values, then they obviously cannot be generated by these. This supports the notion that the ‘awakened’ state is trans-conceptual, and occurs across different spiritual and religious traditions. (There is a similar argument regarding the mystical experiences of young children, who have not yet been exposed to religious beliefs and/or do not yet have the cognitive capacity to understand them [Taylor, 2009].)

References


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PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL OF AWARENESS

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ABSTRACT: There is a spiritual aspect to the art of photography. A person’s awareness of the objective, exterior world can be developed through this medium but, rather than this mere observing, it is possible to begin to see into the non-dual nature of reality. The separation between the photographer and what is photographed, the self and other, gradually diminishes. This article finds inspiration in the photographer Minor White to demonstrate the potential of photography to develop awareness and deepen spiritual growth.

My unfolding has been a growing pattern of awareness of the cosmos surrounding all of us constantly … the greatest hindrance has been my pride.

–Minor White

… if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.

–Matthew 6: 22

Many photographers comment on the spiritual aspects of their art but, beyond specific photographic literature, there is little written to suggest the potential of this art to foster spiritual growth. While several writers acknowledge the spiritual aspects of photography, their voices have not been greatly heard in the past. Hence, it is perhaps time for further writing and debate. The reader is first afforded a review of available literature that mentions photography as a tool for growth, followed by the voice of Minor White as exemplar. Stressed throughout is the fundamental importance of developing awareness as a vital aspect of spiritual growth and the potential role that photography can play in that process.

Gross and Shapiro (2001) have suggested that creative photographers may exhibit the specific characteristics of the Sage described by the 4th-century B.C. Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, including freedom from the sense of self, receptivity, wu-wei (non-forceful action), spontaneity, nonattachment,
acceptance, resourcefulness, *te* (virtue/power), and free and easy wandering. In more general terms, Pastor Jim Bonewald (2007) states: “I’ve slowed down to take a better look at things around me. This process of slowing down has helped me see details in the world around me that I’ve never noticed before.” Steve Hixon (n.d.) describes “extended moments” when “everything seems alive, and alive with possibility. I want to respond to it, and it’s the camera that connects me.” It is in taking photographs that he experiences the “joy of discovery, of images that celebrate light, color, texture, shape, of the hidden beauty inherent in people, landscapes, wildlife, the world that reflects God’s glory” and Hixon concludes that “when I am doing that, I feel His pleasure.” Zen Master John Daido Loori used photography both as a way to demonstrate spiritual truths and of self-exploration. It was through the “back door of the arts,” admits Loori, that he entered the spiritual life (American Museum of Natural History, 2004).

**Awareness: The Camera as Potential Catalyst**

The word “awareness” derives from “wary” or “watchful.” A person’s awareness, according to Austin (1999), may be “clear or indistinct, expanded or contracted. It can perceive what is meaningful or meaningless, real or imaginary” (p. 296). Awareness can be expanded through a variety of well-known spiritual practices, such as yoga and meditation. Austin (1999) argues that eventually an advanced state, a “flash of insight-wisdom,” may occur in which awareness “still takes in that very same field of basic sensory data from the outside world as it had during the instant just before. But in milliseconds a fresh grasp of this scenery has totally reinterpreted it into a new realm of absolute reality” (p. 296). This article suggests that there is a widely available means, or tool, that may help others to increase awareness (an important aspect of spiritual growth) and see (rather than just look at or perceive) the world with clear eyes, gradually drawing people closer to a state of susceptibility to intuitive understanding of the reality that surrounds, interpenetrates, and shapes their being. That tool is the camera, the use of which enhances the ability to see (that is, seeing beneath superficial appearances), which is vital to an individual’s ability to connect more deeply with the world. As author and photographer Lester (2000) explains, photography ensures that people “see the world rather than just look at it. And by seeing we also begin to understand ourselves” (p. 102). For Franck (1993), the ability to see is that “specifically human capacity that opens one up to empathy, to compassion with all that lives and dies” (p. 39). Indeed, the awareness and acute concentration required for photography lends itself to contemplative practices. As Lester (2000) suggests, “When you use a camera, not as a machine but as an extension of your heart, you become one with your subject” (p. 4). The novice photographer discovers that taking a good picture is much harder than it looks and ponders why images by professionals seem so much more effective. Awareness, however, gradually develops in people to include the effects of light and shadow, sunlight or moonlight, or artificial illumination. Fortunately, as Mitchell (2002) writes, light is “always ready to befriend the sensitive photographer and to induce metacomprehensive
wonder” (p. 189). Not only the time of day, but also the passing seasons become relevant. As Coleman (2005) observes:

Those who practise and study photography learn in short order that their real subject matter is not the physical stuff in front of the lens, but the light reflected from it. The camera’s lens and film can only describe that light, and the surfaces from which it bounces. It is up to the photographer to find, within those limitations, ways of articulating what that light and those surfaces reveal, and, in addition, what is perceived and intuited behind and beneath them (p. 32).

**MINOR WHITE AS EXEMPLAR**

One of the most vocal champions of the link between photography and spirituality was the American photographer Minor White (1908–1976). He was an associate of Alfred Stieglitz, as well as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston (co-founders of *Aperture* magazine in 1952), and an expert in “Equivalence” and the sequencing of images. One of White’s achievements, according to Adams (1996), was to demonstrate that photographs “can point beyond themselves” (p. 92). In a similar vein, Johnson, Rice, and Williams (2000) argue that White was a “most influential photographer,” pushing the boundaries of perception beyond merely what the eye can observe (p. 638).

When the photographer is willing to spend time with something, or someone, the act of looking can become one of seeing. White (1969/1982) reassures that: “No matter how slow the film, Spirit always stands still long enough for the photographer It has chosen” (p. 22). He suggests (p. 143), as a photographer:

Be still with yourself

Until the object of your attention

Affirms your presence.

Ideally, the photographer receptively opens the heart, devoting total attention to the subject in all humility until the rift between self and other diminishes. Thereafter, as White (1975) says, the “ultimate experience of anything is the realisation of what’s behind it” (p. 286). This “presence,” however, is beyond words and lies in the realm of experience. It is “something sacred, it’s our Creator, or it’s another force, it’s grace. Through the centuries there have been many names for it. If you give a person a word for it, he doesn’t see it, or he says he sees it, but he really doesn’t. You have to work for it” (p. 286).

At a psychological level, Minor White (1963) points out that a photograph acts as a mirror to the viewer of that image: “If he is struck with terror, perhaps he has met something worthy of his fear. If he finds something magnificent, it is because something beautiful in him has been magnified.” Furthermore, White (1978) states that the “image or sequence that holds the mirror to the man
scares the fearful and stimulates the joyous. Sometimes a spiritual one sees his Self” (p. 43). In other words, the way things are seen is a reflection of a person’s being. That is, each person’s experience of an image will depend on their level of consciousness. Indeed, photography (or, literally, “drawing with light”) relies entirely on light, in which White (1968) argues, “the inner and the outer stand mirrored” (p. 12).

Minor White was responsible for developing a Creative Audience class at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Here, White (1975) says, the photographer induced “heightened awareness in himself in order to have an experience of the thing he is going to photograph. And a person who is just going to look at photographs can do exactly the same thing.” Furthermore, he argues that it is “creative to be able to induce that state, because it puts one in touch with deeper places in oneself. One can get in touch with the Creator within oneself” (p. 282). White (1975) then points out that photography is just one tool for this process, stating: “I try to find this Creator in everything I do. This is the way that you can move through photography, or anything else that you’re doing, toward locating that aspect which is ever-present and ever-hidden from us” (p. 284). So, everyday activities are also a path to insight, whether it is walking in the park, making a cup of tea, gardening or washing the dishes.

The work of Minor White was the most inspirational in the writing of this article, but his work is not as well known, nor available, as it deserves. Although he was a consummate photographer, the real work of White (1975) was spiritual: “I am attempting to be in contact with my Creator, asking and allowing that to tell me what to do. I’m trying to be in contact with something that is ultimately wise and follow its directions” (p. 287). For White (1972), this is not necessarily a Christian God or Buddha, but rather he recognises that for photographers: “Some force, not of their doing, working through them works through camera” (p. 19). That force goes beyond the constraints of any religion.

Minor White (1968) summarizes the spiritual journey of the individual: “from the ego centered to the perfect servant through which the light can work. The search for authenticity to the I AM Self” (p. 13). White (1968), however, regrets that people “walk in miracle constantly, but live isolated in apathy and unawareness” (p. 70). Yet, photography is a readily available means for engaging the world with increased concentration, and in contemplation or meditation. It offers the possibility of a deeper awareness and heightened consciousness for those who are willing to use it as a discipline for developing their understanding and experience of spirituality, and the reality in which they are immersed. So, photography, used skillfully and wisely, is another means to help engage with the spiritual path.

Minor White’s “Creator” is always there for those who wish to become aware of it. The art of photography, in its ultimate form, is concerned with a person’s vision of the world and the deeper meanings of reality. Photography can be a tool for seeing the world (rather than looking at it) and act as a stepping stone towards intuitive understanding. Images are no longer an attempt to capture the external environment, but a witness to reality.
As Gross and Shapiro (1996) point out, photography (as with the other arts) shares the “capacity for evoking the transpersonal dimension of a larger universe, by such means as grasping the constructive nature of reality, generating a breathless moment of eternity, inducing a deep state of mindfulness, or sweeping away the self through a sense of awe” (p. 189). Minor White grasped this potential of photography, but his insight should now be accessed again by this generation. The advent of the digital camera has made the photographic path to spiritual dimensions even more easily accessible. It is up to all of us to harness this readily available tool to expand our awareness and start experiencing the non-dual nature of reality. Without the experience, all the theory is dust.

I would like to invite others to dialogue and debate the use of photography, and perhaps other arts or ways (for example, poetry, martial arts or the tea ceremony), as means by which a spiritual life can be nurtured and then its fruits shared with the wider community. As photography is able to promote greater awareness, to what extent and in what way might that be valid for all other forms of creative or fine arts, and which is the most efficacious? Such questions warrant further investigation.

NOTES


REFERENCES


The Author

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In their book, *The Spiritual Anatomy of Emotion* (2009), Michael Jawer and Marc Micozzi explain what they term “anomalous perception” in terms of a neurobiological framework that centers on the concept of emotion. For the authors, feeling is the basis of consciousness, and they elegantly resolve the Cartesian mind-body split by locating our emotive-feeling states throughout the body, rather than limiting their location to the brain alone. In brief, they explain that emotion is an embodied experience that has the capacity to influence not only the sensate person, but also the external environment. According to the authors, when feelings are held in the body they become stuck, which leads to a variety of psychosomatic illnesses, as well as external paranormal events. This process is governed by each individual’s unique neurobiological makeup, which Jawer and Micozzi characterize as having two main types: thin-boundary (sensitive) individuals and thick-boundary (less sensitive) individuals. Each of us lies somewhere along a gradient between these two poles. Whether we are thin or thick boundaried determines how anomalously perceptive we are.

In addition to discussing their own original research, Jawer and Micozzi do a good job of pulling together a wide array of research studies from across the cognitive neuroscience spectrum. In many sections of the book, they work hard to bring a careful critical analysis to the studies they review, making helpful suggestions for how these studies could be improved. Where there were methodological or statistical flaws, Jawer and Micozzi point them out. However, despite these efforts, there were several factual errors in the text and frequent over-generalizations that detracted from their overall work.

The authors describe thin-boundary individuals in several ways. They start out by explaining the relationship between early childhood trauma, the autonomic nervous system (ANS), and the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA). When a person experiences trauma early in life, this sets up their neurobiology to be especially sensitive to stress; in essence, such a person has a lower tolerance for stress, and his or her ANS and HPA are easily activated. These conditions increase the person’s tendency to experience allergies, environmental sensitivities, gastrointestinal illnesses, and headaches. Jawer and Micozzi then elucidate the personality characteristics of a thin-boundary person: fantasy-prone, easily hypnotized (suggestible), easily overwhelmed by sensory stimuli, with emotional energy flowing quickly throughout the body. The thin-boundary person, according to the authors, is also able to perceive anomalous events in the environment, which they characterize as out-of-body experiences (including near-death experiences), apparitions, poltergeists, extra-sensory perception, and other psi phenomena. In addition, thin-boundary types are able to control their autonomic responses at will, such as their heart rate, blood
pressure, and skin temperature. They conducted survey research that formed the basis for these neurobiological and personality variables in thin-boundary people.

In contrast, thick-boundary people have a neurobiological constitution that features a slower-paced emotional-feeling system. Jawer and Micozzi (2009) make the case that these individuals are prone to dissociated feeling—emotions literally get “stuck” somewhere in the body. Jawer and Micozzi are sometimes unclear on exactly how this process leads to anomalous events in the environment, but they do state regularly that these thick-boundary people are often the cause of such events (especially poltergeist activity). In addition to causing paranormal activity, these individuals often influence or disrupt electrical activity in computers, cars, lighting equipment, and so on. Due to the excess of unexpressed emotion (energy), the person is regularly displacing this energy out into the external environment. In summary, according to the authors, the thick-boundary person is the cause of anomalous events, and the thin-boundary person is the perceiver of said events.

One of the difficulties with Jawer and Micozzi’s (2009) work is that there are several areas where the ideas become unclear, are sometimes overgeneralized, and contain factual errors. For instance, they state many times that the thick-boundary person holds dissociated emotional energy in his or her body. This would suggest a tendency to dissociate in general. However, when discussing the behavioral and personality characteristics of the thin-boundary person, Jawer and Micozzi (2009) tell us that “anomalous perception in general is considered to be dissociative” (p. 127). How can both types share the same tendency toward dissociation? Similarly, when discussing out-of-body experiences (specifically, NDEs), the authors cite research on the personality characteristics of people who have had mystical experiences, which is a much more general term. They continue on to ascribe these characteristics to all people who experience an NDE. This thought process is too general, and is akin to comparing apples to oranges because they are both round fruit. Another difficulty encountered in the book was that there were several factual errors. They tell us that there are universal facial expressions for four emotions, when there are actually six (Ekman, 1971); they refer to dopamine as a hormone when it is a neurotransmitter, and they tell us that the sympathetic nervous system slows the heart down when it actually speeds it up.

That being said, there were several strengths of the book as well. Jawer and Micozzi (2009) make an elegant case for the resolution of mind-body dualism when they emphasize the idea that emotion is a full-body process. They also discuss several exciting areas of neuro-scientific research involving the discovery of neuropeptide receptors in both the heart and the gut. The latter has been termed the enteric nervous system, and is literally responsible for our “gut” feelings. Along the same lines, the heart does much more than just circulate blood and oxygen throughout our body; according to Jawer and Micozzi, it also is a central electro-chemical agent in the experience of emotion.

Jawer and Micozzi (2009) also do an exceptional job of critically analyzing research studies that have looked at the role emotion plays for several
situations, such as whether or not emotional states can affect random number generators. In addition to identifying these studies’ weaknesses, they also make some excellent suggestions for how each study could be improved, while further recommending how future researchers could approach each topic. They also regularly examine their own preconceptions and biases throughout the body of the work, which is a refreshingly honest approach to writing about exceptional, anomalous, and paranormal experience.

References


The Author

Michael A. Jawer is an emotion researcher and expert on “sick building syndrome.” He lives in Vienna, Virginia. Marc S. Micozzi, M.D., Ph.D., is adjunct professor of physiology and biophysics at Georgetown University School of Medicine. He edited the first U.S. alternative medicine textbook, *Fundamentals of Complementary & Alternative Medicine*. He lives in Bethesda, Maryland, and Rockport, Massachusetts.

The Reviewer

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This two volume set delves into a topic that has long needed a thorough and systematic inquiry. To begin with, it should be noted that this topic has had several names: altered states of consciousness (ASC), alternative states of consciousness, and now altering consciousness. Etzel Cardena and Michal Winkelman deserve credit for the hard work of mobilizing an in-depth treatment of altering consciousness, the resulting state changes that occur, and their effects. The concept of consciousness composed of states was popularized by Charles T. Tart’s pioneering volumes *Altered States of Consciousness* (1969/1972) and *States of Consciousness* (1975). (Arnold Ludwig actually coined the ASC phrase, as Tart points out.) These books and the theory and research that have been accumulated since then have at least earned a place in introductory texts of psychology, which at this writing usually include a chapter that names various consciousness states, such as sleep, dreams, meditation, hypnosis, psychedelics, and addictive drugs. Instead of one chapter, these two volumes have 32 chapters of text along with insightful orientations by the editors. Volume 1 addresses altered states in history, cultures, and the humanities. Volume 2 covers biological dimensions, neuroscience, and psychology. The chapters go far beyond the listing of a few states of consciousness. They range widely from ancient divination, cultural rites, and ceremonies, to ASC’s role in expressive and performance arts, spirituality, religion, emotions, somatics, and biological, chemical, and neuroscience correlates, which appear to be the present cutting edge of altered state research. As one would expect, psychedelic substances receive attention, including LSD, DMT, and peyote. These two volumes will be standard references for many years.

The chapters provide references to many research studies with altered state relevance and reveal that there is a substantial literature in this area, albeit not necessarily pulled together, but at least available. Much of it is documented in these two volumes. The chapters are balanced, including first hand reports (qualitative) of experiences, as well as experimental (quantitative) studies. The authors have respect for the positive values that have been and are being served by various altered states, with such purposes as social organization, mental and physical healing, guidance, inner exploration, decision-making, spiritual and religious development, and conviviality. Considerations of addiction and pathology are addressed as well, with a consideration of dependence as an altered state and mental disorders as negative ASCs.

These are not flippant do-it-yourself books, but ones that take alternate states and their many potentials seriously.

The volumes build a case that many of these alterations of consciousness can be considered as stable states of subjective reality that are often correlated with psychological and biological systems. Consciousness alterations may be explained as constructions by our brains, doors to other realities, conditioned social patterns, non-conscious thinking, useful hypothetical entities, or creative illusions. They have parameters, repeatability, properties, and inherent rules. As William James (1929/1902) noted after experiencing an altered state (from nitrous oxide), “our waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted by the
filmiest of screens, there lie potential kinds of consciousness entirely different, . . .
definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their application and adaptation” (p. 378–379). These books create a case for a science—subjective and objective—that goes behind the curtain to learn more about the creations of alternate consciousness and their uses. My opinion is that we have not recognized the multiple states that surround and permeate us in everyday life, with or without drugs or overt facilitation, some intentional, others unconscious: this might include driving a car, childbirth, playing basketball, depression, intense emotion, sexual activity, peak experiences, falling in love, knitting, absorbed in a movie, focused learning, electronic dance music, walks in nature, schizophrenia, phobias, reverie, and many others. Knowing these to be states based on alterations of consciousness, one may possibly influence the nature and intensity of the effect using what we know about altered states. Some alterations of consciousness result in states that have non-ordinary or exceptional properties that reside in them, properties that are not normally accessed, such as the peyote songs of Native Americans, deep meditation, shamanic flights, imagery in dreams, spirit possession, absorption, changed perception of music and creative artistic work. Further, some of these conditions and experiences can be transferred into everyday settings and be facilitated in one’s “normal” consciousness.

Of particular interest to readers of this journal are implications for the roles of consciousness alterations in transpersonal experience. Yulia Ustinova vividly presents the ASC religious practices from prehistory, through Greek and Roman cultures. Moshe Sluhovsky discusses spirit possession (such as channeling). The use of altered states in yoga and Hinduism is presented by Jonathan Shear. Visionary spiritual experiences and issues of mental health are addressed by David Lukoff. Mystical experiences are discussed by Antoon Geels, and shamanism shows up multiple times in chapters by Fred Previc, Michael Winkelman, and others. Contemporary electronic dance events (raves) include encounters with spiritual experience, discussed by Graham St. John. A chapter by David Luke reviews the effects of various altered states on tests of PSI (ESP), on paranormal phenomena, and on meditation, hypnosis, and other interventions. A preface by eminent transpersonal psychologist Charles T. Tart shows the story behind his innovative conceptualization of states of consciousness, a personal journey of a true scientist.

Contemporary issues of terminology and research are lucidly addressed by Julie Beischel, Adam J. Rock, and Stanley Krippner. This fits with chapters on neuroscience, psychedelic substances, and the biological processes. However, there could be more review of the psychological work of Tart (systems theory), Ronald Pekala (with ASC assessment instruments), Ernest Hilgard, (hypnosis oriented), and others who have attempted to spell out criteria for terminology, maps of ASC cartography, and the dynamics of alteration. Future research can perhaps correlate the neuroscience with the phenomenology. While these books show increasing research studies, there is limited attention given to the methodology and problems of doing research on these experiences, which can have fuzzy boundaries, shifts in perception, effects on the sense of self, and changes in apparent reality or perhaps real reality. The conventional
experimental and qualitative methods may need to access creative and innovative approaches. However, this can be for future studies. The volumes are more than ample in providing a wealth of data and a wide scope of coverage. They give us an excellent foundation for further research and theory.

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The Editors

*Etzel Cardena*, Ph.D., holds the endowed Thorson Chair of Psychology at Lund University in Lund, Sweden. His work has received awards from the American Psychological Association. He has more than 200 publications and edited the book *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence*. Cardena has also worked professionally as a theater director, actor, and playwright.

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In the recently published book *Spiritual Bypassing*, Masters (2010) expands on his premise that spiritual bypassing - the use of spiritual practices to avoid rather than reveal and work through pain - is a harmful phenomenon. This potentially harmful behavior presents itself in many forms. The author presents examples of spiritual bypassing and indicates how this behavior thwarts the development of a true individuated presence.

In the beginning chapters, the behaviors of bypassing are presented: “spiritual bypassing being a very persistent shadow of spirituality, manifesting in many forms…” (Masters, p. 2), such as extreme detachments, numbing of our emotions, the inability to allow for negative feelings especially anger, lack of boundaries, and an overdeveloped rational way of seeing the world. Rationalization - (living from one’s head) - displaces emotional and moral intelligence to create a safe haven. He points out, “Spirituality - the cultivation of intimacy with what we, in our heart of hearts, know to be sacred or ultimate - cannot be left out of any serious consideration of what it is to be human” (p. 194).

Masters (2010) also discusses the controversial assertion that some forms of meditation may encourage spiritual bypassing. He points out that Eastern and Western practices can be very different and cautions the reader to acknowledge these differences. Spiritual practice can be counterproductive within a society that places a high value on so-called enlightenment techniques. “When people use spiritual practice to try and compensate for low self-esteem, social alienation, or emotional problems, they corrupt the true nature of spiritual practice” (Welwood, 2000, p. 206).

Acknowledgement of pain is defined as a key element for healing. Masters (2010) openly warns against the detachment that can arise from the use of spiritual practices that promote mindfulness and observation of what arises. “As meditators we may assume we are sitting with our pain - observing moment-to-moment-when we in fact may just be sitting on it, using our witnessing capacity to keep it at a distance rather than becoming more intimate with it” (Masters, p. 55).

Psychotherapists and spiritual teachers educating their clients in meditation practices need to resist the desire to jump on the bandwagon of enlightenment. In doing so, they may actually be enabling vulnerable clients to engage in spiritual bypassing by encouraging a process to follow under the guise of a solution for emotional problems.

In this book, there is emphasis on the value of psychotherapy as a vital key in the process of addressing pain. Psychotherapy should be, “… emotionally literate, somatically attuned, spiritually vital psychotherapy” (Masters, 2010, p. 49). This kind of integrated therapy can create the vital container for spiritual growth to occur.

Other chapters deal with anger and its use, the value of shadow work, and relationship dynamics. There is mention that the use of sex as a means of feeling better can foster a subtle avoidance of reality. The author uses the term, “disembodied spirituality” (Masters, 2010, p. 124), and emphasizes the
importance of getting back in touch with the physical body. Masters suggests that working with the body can become a catalyst for healing painful feelings that surface in the process.

The author, positing the importance of intuitive integral psychology, provides two appendices on the matter. The first is intended for psychotherapists. The second appendix encapsulates working with mental, physical, emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of our lives. He acknowledges the capacity for spiritual experience and psychological development to work together promoting an integrated life. Nothing is omitted or bypassed.

The book espouses this concept of an integral philosophy. Psychotherapists and spiritual teachers will find valuable tips from reading this book. Clearly, there is a need for further dialogue between eastern and western schools of thought. When these differences are better understood, the possibility for a marriage between psychological work and spiritual development will continue to evolve.

**Reference**


**The Author**

*Robert Augustus Masters*, Ph.D., has written eleven books. His books include *Transformation Through Intimacy: The Journey Toward Mature Monogamy* and *The Anatomy & Evolution of Anger: An Integral Exploration*. He holds a doctorate in psychology and has been a practicing psychotherapist for thirty-three years. He also is a trainer of psychotherapists. See his website www.robertmasters.com.

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Elliot Benjamin, Ph.D., describes his experiences in a variety of new age spiritual organizations, most of which are psychology-based groups. He describes each group and offers his ratings based on three academic scales in use since the 1970s: the Anthony Typology, the Wilber Integral Model, and the Bonewits Cult Danger Scale. He then places the groups on a spectrum that ranges from favorable and benign to high cult danger. The first hundred pages of the book familiarize the reader with the scales and Benjamin’s method of rating.

Developing a reliable rating method is useful, since it emphasizes the differences between groups, and would prevent journalists and casual researchers from lumping all new age spiritual organizations in the same category of danger. Along with the more notorious groups, Benjamin rates about a dozen groups that he considers benign. This may help researchers who study group dynamics to recognize what makes a group dangerous. It may also inform religious leaders who want to fall on the favorable-benign side of the spectrum.

Researchers will find plentiful information on lesser known groups. Since many of the groups described in the book are small, or not considered dangerous, until now they may have been ignored in the cultic studies literature. Hopefully, the information on benign groups will put some people’s minds at ease. As the director of Steamboats.com, a website dedicated to historic preservation, I once received a letter from a concerned mother questioning her son’s employment as a deckhand on the *Delta Queen Steamboat*. I assured her that it was most likely a positive experience for her son that would look good on his résumé. Benjamin’s descriptions may bring similar peace of mind to friends and relatives of people who dabble in the benign groups he covers.

The Anthony Typology, developed by Dick Anthony, analyzes a group on the scope of its beliefs, whether it is charismatic, and whether it is antagonistic toward the outside world. The Wilber Integral Model, developed by Ken Wilber, rates a group according to how controlling it is, and whether its philosophy has a rational or traditional basis. The Bonewits scale, developed by Isaac Bonewits, assigns a number between one (low danger) and ten (high danger) on fifteen traits, such as the leader’s claim of wisdom, the amount of wisdom attributed (blind followers), and rigidity of dogma. Bonewits rates how much a group is interested in money and political power; as well as the common hallmarks of a dangerous cult: sexual abuse, censorship, endorsement of violence, paranoia, lack of sense of humor about itself, internal control of members, and surrender of will. The ratings are added up and divided by fifteen to come up with an average cult danger rating.

Benjamin describes each group, then rates each on the three scales, and follows with his rationalization for why he rated each group as he did. He admits that his ratings are purely subjective, based on his experiences. Individual researchers will certainly disagree with some of Benjamin’s ratings, and certainly the groups themselves will disagree if they have a bad rating.
One of the weaknesses of rating organizations is that it is difficult to see what is going on behind the scenes. A researcher would have to stumble into the inner circle of any group to find out what is really going on. Therefore, there is a danger of falsely giving a group a benign rating. Even a homeowners’ association or bridge club may have the potential to inflict extreme emotional, financial, or other abuses, which a casual observer may not notice. Also, it must be kept in mind that groups can change. They may reform themselves or turn sinister, based on who is in the group, and whether the system is ripe for abuse, or ready for healing. In addition, once a group has been stained by sexual or other violent forms of abuse, it may have a difficult time getting its reputation back. Therefore, high ratings on the Sexual Manipulation and Endorsement of Violence scales need to be more heavily weighted to get an accurate picture of a group’s overall danger rating.

Another note is that it would be a mistake to apply the Bonewits scale to political groups, as Benjamin has in essays outside of this volume. All political groups would score high on several of the scales, such as Wisdom Claimed, Wisdom Credited, and Dogma, and certainly they would score high on the Wealth and Political Power scales. Since these five scales would be elevated, it would be unfair to compare the average of a political group’s rating to the average of a new age spiritual organization. To obtain a more accurate rating of political organizations, a researcher would need to remove those five items, and add five items to rate the group’s integrity. Does the group lie for political gain? This would say more about whether a political group is dangerous than if they want wealth. Needing money is built into the game of politics these days.

In Chapters Two and Three, Benjamin presents a collection of essays he wrote at the time he was going through his group encounters. The essays are presented in two sections, first the late 1990s and early 2000s; then the 1970s. Benjamin took about fifteen years off in between to earn his Ph.D. in mathematics and establish himself as a college professor with a specialization in pure mathematics. He describes his academic pursuits as part of his spiritual search, since he spent years working on pure mathematics for several hours each morning as a meditation.

Benjamin’s essays in Chapters Two and Three read like journal entries, written in the moment. Many of these entries begin when he is enamored with a new group he is exploring, then in a subsequent entry, he denounces the group and explains what he dislikes about it. He seems to have a cast iron stomach for unusual group experiences. Many ex-cult members and researchers may experience the gack factor (feeling repulsed) by some of Benjamin’s realizations as a naïve follower.

As an ex-member of an Eastern guru group, I have avoided all new age religious organizations except a very few. The Philosophical Research Society, founded by Manly Hall in 1934, was a short walk from where I lived in Los Angeles in the early 2000s. I attended many lectures, workshops, and even a tai chi class there with no adverse reactions. However, once in the late 1990s, I attended a house party put on by members of a group Benjamin would rate as mild. At one point, they got everyone’s attention to do a group meditation. Everyone joined hands in a circle in the living room. This was an unbearable
trigger for me and I waited out in the front yard until the ceremony was over. In my experience, I would have found most of the situations Benjamin lived through as undesirable for myself.

Benjamin describes his deepest and most conflicted affiliation in Chapter Four: Encounters with Scientology. In a series of his characteristic journal-like essays, he reveals little-known details about the group, such as how they get people to join and what goes on in an auditing session. As a researcher, I never knew much about Scientology before, but the book has given me a substantial education on the group’s inner workings. Since Scientology is a highly secretive group, I believe this is one of the book’s greatest contributions.

One of the most terrifying aspects of Benjamin’s experience was the amount of money he invested in the various groups he joined. His non-cult friends and family must have found themselves exasperated trying to prevent him from wasting yet more of his hard-earned money chasing the next great thing. Benjamin repeats a similar pattern in each group: He becomes intrigued, gets hoodwinked for a sum of money, becomes disenchanted, and leaves. He discusses the financial hardships of group involvement quite extensively, which will be informative for seekers who are considering a similar path.

One would think that interest in joining coercive organizations would have died down by now, hitting its peak in the 1970s. However, due to millennial fears and economic hardship, more people than ever are attracted to bad leaders. This book issues a warning that is needed now more than ever, and will therefore appeal to scholars, as well as families and others who lose a loved one to such groups.

Publishing this book is a milestone for Benjamin, since it is the culmination of his nearly forty years of writing about alternative spiritual organizations. In essence, he is an unapologetic cult-hopper, revealing in Chapter Five his disappointment with the Jewish religion of his ancestors and the loss of his father at the age of two as factors that may have led him to search for meaning through new age group involvement. He also admits that he joined particular groups after falling in love with women involved in the groups.

After describing and rating all of his group experiences, the book seems to point to the need for a creative non-fiction rendering. It would be refreshing to read a memoir by him that goes in chronological order, offering selected scenes from his journey. He has already told us what he really thinks. Now all that is left to do is to show us the worlds he has discovered sans any further analysis.

REFERENCE

The Author

Elliot Benjamin, Ph.D., is a philosopher, mathematician, musician, counselor, and writer, with Ph.D.’s in both mathematics and psychology. He has a specialization in Consciousness and Spirituality, and is the author of over seventy-five published articles in the fields of humanistic and transpersonal psychology, parapsychology, spirituality and the awareness of cult dangers, art and mental disturbance, pure mathematics, and mathematics enrichment. He has been a mathematics professor for twenty-one years at Unity College in Maine, and currently teaches mathematics and psychology at a number of different on-campus, and online schools. He enjoys playing the piano and tennis, and ballroom dancing.

The Reviewer

Nori Muster, M.S., is an author living in Arizona. She loves sharing stories about her life and visiting with friends. Her first book, Betrayal of the Spirit (1997), is her memoir of ten years in the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Former ISKCON members worldwide have accepted her book as a mind-opening narrative of a critical decade in the group’s history. She has written nine books that promote rational thinking and recovery from systemic abuse, which are available on Amazon.com.

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Mayer (2007a, 2007b) describes his bodymind approach as Integral Transpersonal Psychotherapy that brings the body and the healing power of life energy back into psychotherapy, which has over-emphasized the mind. To highlight that the mind is indistinguishable from the body, he uses the term bodymind in the subtitle and throughout the text. In these books, and in his contributions to the scientific research base, Mayer has been a pioneer in promoting the incorporation of Tai Chi and Qigong into psychotherapy. He has 20 publications on psychotherapy and mind-body approaches to healing, many in peer reviewed journals, such as a carefully controlled study on Qigong and hypertension that was published in The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine. In addition to drawing on the language and theory of Chinese medicine, including the internal martial arts of Tai Chi and Qigong, as well as acupressure self-touch, he makes links to psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, and other traditional forms of psychotherapy, focusing, energy
therapies, symbolic process approaches to healing, hypnosis, psycho-neuroimmunological research, and ancient sacred wisdom traditions.

Mayer (2007a, 2007b) provides descriptions and rationales for integrating specific somatic practices into psychotherapy, such as the Qigong poses *Standing like a Tree* and *Holding Golden Balls in the Waters of Life* to a “change your life stance.” He points out how these practices parallel contemporary affect regulation techniques in mindfulness and breathwork, as well as modern variants such as emotional freedom techniques (EFT) and eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). And he also makes informed links to cognitive restructuring and psychodynamic therapy to show how the use of all of these modalities can create transformative practices tailored to each individual person.

This is a hands-on approach to engaging bodymind practices with clients (or by yourself) (Mayer, 2007a, 2007b). *Bodymind Healing Psychotherapy (BMHP)* creates a place of openness and strength that provides embodied insight that talk therapy alone cannot. Although initially Mayer kept these two streams in his life apart, he evolved this integrative approach in a center he co-founded with a multidisciplinary team of Western doctors and complementary health practitioners over 25 years ago. His books detail how self-healing methods combining Qigong, Western depth psychotherapy, and symbolic process modalities (often drawn from ancient wisdom traditions) can treat many physical ailments and lead to changes in long-standing psychological patterns. Mayer has gone beyond a one-way conversation that plugs Qigong into psychotherapy as merely a technique, and instead has created a two-way dialogue in which the wisdom traditions also require updating. In this vein, he also advocates that the field of energy psychology, despite having a solid evidence-base, would benefit by incorporating wider dimensions of transpersonal and integral psychotherapy, and approaches such as Jungian active imagination from grounding in the body. He situates this presentation within a paradigmatic shift that is transforming healthcare, but which he considers still to be in the pre-paradigmatic phase. I expect that when the history of this shift is written, Mayer will figure prominently.

The first section of these books provide the rationale for his approach, including citing and discussing recent research demonstrating that Qigong, one of the five branches of Chinese Medicine, lowers blood pressure, improves balance, reduces chronic pain, alleviates insomnia, and helps with many chronic diseases (Mayer, 2007a, 2007b). The second section includes case illustrations where Mayer presents the use of *BMHP* for treatment-resistant insomnia, anxiety, posttraumatic stress and panic disorders, chronic pain, addictions including smoking and binge eating, hypertension, depression, and diabetes. In the final chapter of this section, he also addresses applications for many other neuromuscular, joint, and digestive problems, and several additional conditions. The third section of these books covers how to apply ancient sacred wisdom traditions along with bodymind healing methods in everyday life. In *Energy Psychology (EP)*, there is a fourth section for a 20-minute Qigong practice routine that is included as the final chapter in the third section in *BMHP* (Mayer, 2007a).
I field tested parts of *BMHP* (Mayer, 2007a) in my year-long psychotherapy class at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology. I had already been integrating Aikido into the curriculum and published on the overlap between the core principles of Aikido and psychotherapy (Faggianelli & Lukoff, 2006), but Tai Chi and Qigong have a much more evolved theory and practice base as healing arts. After reading *BMHP*, I attended some of Mayer’s workshops and asked him to lead a session of my psychotherapy class. Students found the practice of “push hands” that he demonstrated emulates the therapeutic imperative to be empathic and present even as the client pushes one off center. I also have shared with students his argument for a new origin myth for psychotherapy that goes back further than the psychology laboratories, which are usually credited with marking the birth of the field, to include the ancient sacred wisdom traditions that contribute to the imaginal mytho-poetic exploration that is so important to healing. His books serve as resources that I reference when teaching and supervising students on how to integrate mind-body practices into their clinical work.

Mayer (2007a, 2007b) also addresses the issue of whether the therapist intending to make use of Tai Chi or Qigong needs to have his or her own practice of these internal martial arts. He is not strident about this, as he states, “maybe you don’t need to,” but adds (as I would strongly concur), “it helps to have such a practice behind you to ingrain these abilities that are present in your body for use at key moments when you are triggered” (2007a, p. 274). If you are considering integrating some mind body practices from Chinese medicine into your therapy practice, or are looking for a way to incorporate them into your own self-healing journey, these books can inform your understanding and provide practical guidance. However, it is difficult for this reviewer to imagine anyone being able to use these practices in psychotherapy with no prior practice. Mayer does provide training workshops and has DVDs where he illustrates these practices if you want to delve deeper into his approach.

These two books overlap considerably (Mayer 2007a, 2007b). In deciding which one to read, it is worth noting that the *Energy Psychology* book has a chapter (Chapter 5) on changing the origin myth of psychology to include ancient sacred wisdom traditions. The *BMHP* book has a chapter on psychotherapy as an internal martial art, whereas the *EP* book has a chapter about everyday life as an internal martial art. The *BMHP* book has a chapter (Chapter 22) on the ethics of incorporating Qigong into psychotherapy that is essential for any therapist considering incorporating these practices into their approach. Since the *EP* book is more recent, it has updated research on *EP* that is not in the *BMHP* book.

**Reference**

The Author

*Michael Mayer,* Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist practicing in the San Francisco area who specializes in self-healing methods for physical and mental health. He presents his bodymind healing approach at professional conferences, national/international workshops, universities, and hospitals. He co-founded the Transpersonal Psychology Program at John F. Kennedy University in Pleasant Hill, California, and trained therapists there for twelve years. He also co-founded The Health Medicine Institute, a multi-disciplinary medical clinic practicing integrative healthcare. He is the author of 20 publications on bodymind healing, including five books, audiotapes on cancer and chronic disease, and articles on chronic pain, anxiety, and hypertension. He currently resides in Orinda, California, and has three private practice offices in San Francisco, Berkeley, and Lafayette.

The Reviewer

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