

THE LIFE IMPACT OF TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCES WITH A PRONOUNCED QUALITY OF *NOESIS*

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We speak of sacred things occasionally, but always one-on-one, or at most in twos and threes, and then only when the group is known and the time is intimate and safe. Some things have been shown me that I cannot record here, as everyone has experiences too precious to relate To have one of these experiences is like standing on a hillside at night, in the midst of a thunderstorm. All around lies darkness and rolling black clouds; and suddenly the sky is torn open by a sheet of lightning and there exposed before you is the whole valley-trees, pastures, woods, streams, hills. The lightning ends. You are plunged again into darkness. But now you know what's there, and no one in the world can persuade you that you imagined what you saw.

What force governs? ... My answer at the moment is that there are two worlds, visible and invisible. They tangle with each other in increasingly perceptible ways ... if we have the courage to see.

The connection between these worlds can be developed, it seems, by thought or spiritual exercise. Sometimes it simply comes, like wind (Burnham, 1990, pp. 219-220).

Transcendent experiences stand at the origin point of spiritual disciplines and religions, and exemplars of many traditions have lived by understandings that came through these experiences. However, such experiences are not phenomena only of the past, or occurring only in extraordinary people. In contemporary times, significant numbers of people may have had some experience of this "intersection of the timeless moment" (Eliot, 1970, p, 201), a transcendent experience that illumined their lives in some profound way (Greeley & McCready, 1975; Thomas & Cooper, 1980). This experience (sometimes referred to as a *mystical* experience) can come as the result of being earnestly sought, as in the practice of a spiritual discipline, or pursued through the use of psychoactive substances. However, for some, "it simply comes, like wind."

This is a report of a study (Waldron, 1997) of the long-term life impact of such "timeless moments," viewing them through the lens of one of their defining character-

istics, the *noetic* quality, which refers to the direct apprehension of knowledge and understanding accompanying the transcendent experience. These experiences take the percipient beyond his or her own known boundaries of knowledge, experience, and understanding. In the imagery of the above quote, in that moment of the lightning illumination, one sees the lay of the land on into the remote distance. One *knows* something that until that moment was unknown. When the darkness again descends, does the person chart a course dictated by the current reality of the darkness ... or by that knowing, the knowledge of the terrain that was momentarily glimpsed?

Bucke (1969), writing at the beginning of this century, referred to these experiences as *cosmic consciousness*, and considered them to be examples of an evolution in consciousness in-process. Ring (1984), in his study of the meaning of the near-death experience, a specific type of transcendent experience, presents a thesis parallel to Bucke's, that people having such experiences are demonstrating a major evolutionary metamorphosis in the human race. In her study of the relationship between psychological health/maturity and transcendence, Noble (1984) concludes that transcendent experiences are "potentially powerful agents of integration and transformation that may significantly enhance our psycho-social effectiveness, and thereby contribute to our survival as a species" (p, 99). She also concludes that there is a "continuum of transcendent experiences" which should be "explored through their aftermath in percipients' lives" (p, 94). The present study attempts such an exploration, and focuses specifically on those experiences which are spontaneous and which have a pronounced *noetic* quality.

METHODOLOGY

Most studies of transcendent experiences have been quantitative. In two of them (Noble, 1984; Thomas & Cooper, 1980), it has been noted that qualitative in-depth studies are needed to explore more deeply the meaning of such experiences. Therefore a qualitative approach, the case study, was chosen for the purpose of the in-depth study of the long-term life impact of these experiences, and the meaning over time to the percipients. A collective case study design was used, utilizing the in-depth interview of six persons who met the criteria of the study: 1) having had a clearly defined transcendent experience; 2) with a strong noetic quality; 3) seven or more years prior to the study. The case studies constituted the primary source of data for the study, and data from questionnaires was used as a secondary source. A cross-case analysis of the cases was conducted in order to identify major emerging themes of life impact, and these themes were then compared with the data from the questionnaires.

TERMINOLOGY

Key Term Definitions

This type of experience has been variously termed *transcendent experience* (Maslow, 1964; Maxwell & Tschudin, 1990; Noble, 1984); *transcendental experience* (Hardy, 1979; Ring, 1984); *religious experience* (Hardy, 1979; James, 1961; Maxwell &

Tschudin, 1990; Stark, 1965); *spiritual/religious experience* (Ahern, 1990); *mystical experience* (Leuba, 1925; Stace, 1960; Van Dusen, 1990); *cosmic consciousness* (Bucke, 1969; May, 1991); *peak-experience* or *core-religious experience* (Maslow, 1964); *praetematural experience* (Nelson, 1989; Zaehner, 1971); *ecstasy* (Greeley, 1974; Laski, 1961); *bliss* (Coxhead, 1985); *numinous* (Otto, 1958); *exceptional human experience* (White, 1993); *transpersonal experience* (Grof, 1972, 1985). One of the currently well researched, and thus better known, types of transcendent experience is the *near-death experience* (Moody, 1975, 1988; Morse, 1983, 1990, 1992; Ring, 1980, 1981, 1984; Sutherland, 1989, 1995). Another type of transcendent experience which comes with great impact, and may be significantly difficult for the experiencer, has been termed *spiritual emergency* (Bragdon, 1988, 1990; Grof & Grof, 1986, 1989, 1990; Lukoff, 1985, 1988; Park, 1991). Whatever we term it, the transcendent experience is a spontaneous, extraordinary state-of-consciousness event which breaks through existing boundaries of knowledge and experience. Whether this experience is triggered by external circumstances, an internal state, or is of unknown origin, it comes spontaneously and unexpectedly, like a sudden burst of light on a dark pathway.

Qualities

According to William James (1961), in his classic work written at the beginning of this century, the four hallmark qualities of a transcendent experience are: *ineffability*-the inadequacy of words to express the extraordinary quality of the experience; *noesis*-receiving knowledge by direct and instantaneous perception; *transiency*-the typically momentary quality of the experience; *passivity*-having little or no control over the experience.

Additionally, qualities which may be present in these experiences are: *unity*-the feelings of being in unity and harmonious relationship with everything in existence; *numinosity*-feelings of mystery, awe, and a sense of the sacredness of the experience; *loss of ego*-the sense of having no personal, personality, or ego boundaries; *time/space change*-the experience of time and space altering their usual parameters; *perceptual change/vision/audition-internal* or external visionary or auditory experience, impressions of bright light, sense of "presence" (some authorities do not consider this to be part of a true mystical experience; however, it has been included in this study); *affect change*-the experience of positive feelings such as joy or ecstasy, as well as the possibility of negative or mixed feelings; *transformation*-feelings of having been reborn or transformed, and viewing life from a new and expanded perspective; *paradoxicality-experiencing* a unity of opposites where traditionally we have experienced dualism.

Noetic Quality

James (1961) considered the *noetic quality* to be a *state of knowledge*, one of the four marks which qualify an experience to be considered mystical (or transcendent), and defines it in this way:

Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also *states of knowledge* (italics added). They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for a lifetime (1961, p. 300).

The "discursive intellect" is the mind which gains knowledge through a process of rational, analytical reasoning. The other quality of intellect, that defined as *noetic*, derives from the Greek word *nous*, and "does not function by formulating abstract concepts and then arguing on this basis to a conclusion reached through deductive reasoning, but it understands divine truth by means of immediate experience, intuition or 'simple cognition'" (*The Philokalia*, 1979, vol. 1, p. 362). In the transcendent experience, a completely new understanding comes in an instantaneous fashion, a knowledge which transcends previous understanding. Happold (1970) considers the Indian philosopher Radhakrishnan to be emphasizing the noetic quality when he calls mysticism *integrated thought*. It brings thought, feeling, and intuition together in a new pattern, integrating an issue rather than breaking it into parts, as in analytical thought, and thus creating a meaningful whole.

BACKGROUND

The early part of the twentieth century saw the beginnings of the study of transcendent, mystical, or religious experience. In a religiously oriented study, an Englishwoman, Evelyn Underhill (1974), wrote a classic work on mysticism, defining the five stages of the mystical life. R. Maurice Bucke (1969), a Canadian physician, wrote one of the original studies of what he called *cosmic consciousness* following his own experience of that state, and the American psychologist William James (1961) wrote *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the substance of which made up his famous lectures on religious experience.

May (1991) points out that these works from the beginning of this century are considered classics in the psychology of religion. By the mid-twentieth century, however, the dominant theories in psychology had swung to decisively anti-religious, principally through two influences, the behaviorism of psychologist John Watson, and the psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud. Watson "dismissed religion and religious experience as 'superstition' and 'voodoo,' and mind itself was regarded as 'transcendental fiction'" (May, 1991, p. xi). Freud concluded that "religion was 'illusion' at best, the projection of the 'father complex:.'" and that "religious experience was a state of 'regression' to the oceanic womb" (p. xi). This mind set dominated psychology and psychiatry for more than half a century. Two major exceptions to this during that period of time are the works of Carl Jung, the Swiss one-time associate of Freud who split with him over these issues, and Roberto Assagioli, the Italian psychiatrist who pioneered the field of psychosynthesis.

In America in the 1950s and 1960s, there were two major factors that refocused attention and stimulated serious consideration of transcendent experiences. This was a time of societal turmoil when disillusionment with the prevailing social values led to increased psychedelic drug use and increased interest in meditation and Eastern

religions. The use of psychedelics and the practice of meditation were associated with an apparent increase in transcendent-type experiences. Around this same time, Abraham Maslow, considered to be a "founder" of the fields of humanistic and transpersonal psychology, focused on and explored psychological health. He discovered that one of the hallmarks of the healthy personality was the occurrence of *peak-experiences*, and that these peak-experiences were regarded as among the most important events in the percipient's life (Maslow, 1964, 1968; Walsh, 1992). In England, Sir Alister Hardy founded the Religious Experience Research Centre, which began to collect, study, and categorize *religious experiences* (Hardy, 1979; Hay, 1990).

This resurgence of interest in an increasingly refined study of the transcendent experience continues to the present day.

NATURE OF TRANSCENDENT EXPERIENCE

The transcendent experience takes one momentarily into a mystical consciousness which "involves a different perspective on time, causality, and self-a different reality, considered from our ordinary point of view" (Deikman, 1982, p. 21). According to Happold (1970), it is a "break through the world of time and history into one of eternity and timelessness" (p. 18). Typically, there will be some life factor which acts as a catalyst to this break-through. These have been referred to as "triggers," that is, "circumstances preceding ecstatic experiences and probably standing in a causal relationship to such experiences" (Laski, 1961, p. 16). Laski lists the following as typical triggers: nature, sexual love, childbirth, exercise and movement, religion, art, scientific knowledge, poetic knowledge, creative work, recollection and introspection, and beauty. Hay (1990) notes that many of the accounts collected by the Religious Experience Research Centre in England "seem to be associated with times of great personal distress" (p. 75). Thalbourne (1991) notes as a common catalyst an intense "need to know" which occurs when searching for answers regarding theological or philosophical matters. The experience appears to come in response to that cognitive need, and to provide an answer.

The following accounts demonstrate the spectrum of experiences which can occur. The first case, quoted in Maxwell & Tschudin (1990), is a relatively simple experience of a sense of "presence" which shifted the percipient from a despairing sense of the meaninglessness of life to feelings of peace and joy:

My adolescence was a most trying and sad time, full of questions about the meaning of suffering, life, death, religion and God.

[On a summer evening] Alone in my room, feeling extremely desperate about the seeming foolishness of life, I asked, out loud, that 'If there was a God, could He help?' I was immediately overwhelmed by the feeling of a Presence/Light/Love, all around; it seemed everywhere, I really can't explain. It appeared to last for a minute or two, although I can't be sure. I lost all sense of time. I was left with an indescribable feeling of peace and joy.

This moment completely changed my life. Everything, suddenly seemed to make sense,

Now, in middle age, I still look back to those few moments as the most real and important in my life (Maxwell & Tschudin, 1990, p. 81, No. 4092).

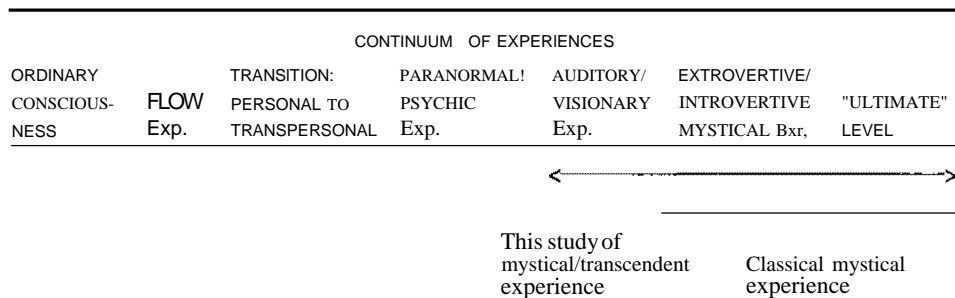
The second experience is more complex, and is the personal account (written in the third person) of R. Maurice Bucke. Bucke was so profoundly moved by his experience that he spent the rest of his life pondering and searching for understanding, leading to his authorship of one of the classics on this topic:

It was in the early spring, at the beginning of his thirty-sixth year. He and two friends had spent the evening reading Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Browning, and especially Whitman. They parted at midnight, and he had a long drive in a hansom (it was in an English city). His mind, deeply under the influence of the ideas, images and emotions called up by the reading and talk of the evening, was calm and peaceful. He was in a state of quiet, almost passive enjoyment. All at once, without warning of any kind, he found himself wrapped around as it were by a flame-colored cloud. For an instant he thought of fire, some sudden conflagration in the great city; the next, he knew that the light was within himself. Directly afterwards came upon him a sense of exultation, of immense joyousness accompanied or immediately followed by an intellectual illumination quite impossible to describe. Into his brain streamed one momentary lightning-flash of the Brahmic Splendor which has ever since lightened his life; upon his heart fell one drop of Brahmic Bliss, leaving thenceforward for always an aftertaste of heaven. Among other things he did not come to believe, he saw and knew that the Cosmos is not dead matter but a living Presence, that the soul of man is immortal, that the universe is so built and ordered that without any peradventure all things work together for the good of each and all, that the foundation principle of the world is what we call love and that the happiness of every one is in the long run absolutely certain. He claims that he learned more within the few seconds during which the illumination lasted than in previous months or even years of study, and that he learned much that no study could ever have taught.

The illumination itself continued not more than a few moments, but its effects proved ineffaceable; it was impossible for him ever to forget what he at that time saw and knew; neither did he, or could he, ever doubt the truth of what was then presented to his mind (Bucke, 1969, pp. 9-10).

To better understand these unusual experiences it may be useful to conceptualize them on a continuum extending from those which precede transcendence to those which are considered transcendent. Figure 1 illustrates the range of experiences as variously referred to in the literature, and how they fall within a spectrum of consciousness.

FIGURE 1
THE RANGE OF EXPERIENCES IN A SPECTRUM OF CONSCIOUSNESS



Ordinary consciousness. Our normal waking mode of consciousness equates to Deikman's (1980) *action mode* of bimodal consciousness, a mode of operation characterized by readiness to manipulate the environment. This state is characterized by the experience of the self as separate and personal.

Flow experience. This level of consciousness reflects the body and mind brought into a higher-order holistic integration (Wilber, 1980a, 1980b). It reflects what Maslow (1962) would define as lesser peaks. This state appears to be what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) refers to *esflow*. He considers it a state of *optimal experience*, and describes it as a state of intense concentration.

Transition from "personal" to "trans-personal." This is the point at which consciousness begins to leave the realm of the personal and to go transpersonal, that is, beyond the personal, and begins to enter what Wilber terms the *subtle sphere* (Wilber, 1980a, 1980b, 1993). This happens through a process that Deikman (1966) has termed the deautomization of the consciousness. Deautomization is a shake-up of one level of organization to allow for an advance or a retreat in the level of organization.

Paranormal/psychic experience. This level (Wilber's *low-subtle sphere*) is the level of astral and psychic planes of consciousness (Wilber, 1980a, 1980b, 1993), at which level paranormal events happen. There is controversy over whether or not events at this level can be considered "mystical" in any sense.

Auditory/visionary experience. This is the level Wilber terms the *high-subtle sphere*. It is the realm of inspiration and high religions intuition; visions, lights, sounds, colors are experienced at this level (Wilber, 1980a, 1980b, 1993). This is the state in which mental activity has stilled, and "an inner world of subtle mental phenomena emerges into awareness" (Walsh, 1993, pp. 127-128). There may be emotions of love and joy, or the mental phenomena may take forms such as archetypal images (Walsh, 1993). This is a realm of controversy, what Underhill (1974) terms "that eternal battle ground," the realm of visions, auditions, automatic writings, and inner "dialogue between the Self and some other factor-the Soul, Love, Reason, or the Voice of God" (p. 266). Again, some writers on mysticism do not consider experiences in this realm as true mystical experience (Stace, 1960; Vaughan, 1989). However, according to Underhill, these experiences are a typical aspect of some of the stages of the mystical path. In the first stage of the mystical path, the soul has been awakened; in the second stage, it is purged (purified); and in the third, it is illumined and taught. Visions and auditions may accompany the first stage, and are frequently a pronounced part of both the second and third stages. The fourth stage of the mystical path has been termed the "dark night of the soul," and is marked by the absence of voice, vision, or presence. Beyond this is the shift to the unitive life, that is, the fifth and highest level of the mystical path where duality fades into the experience of union. Voices and visions belong to the realm of duality.

Although, in the purest sense, visionary, auditory, and similar experiences are not part of what is considered the classical mystical experience, they can be seen to belong in the realm of the transcendent and the mystical that this study is addressing. They can play a vital and important part in the mystical life, or the life lived according to what

becomes known in these transcendent moments. As Underhill states, a "voice' or 'vision' is often the way in which the mystical consciousness presents its discoveries to the surface-mind" (p. 299).

Extrovertive and introvertive mystical experience. These are Stace's terms for what is considered the true mystical experience, terms frequently used in the literature. Both types "culminate in the perception of, and union with, a Unity or One," and both are universal, that is, found in both East and West (Stace, 1960, p. 62). Stace states that the extrovertive experience is usually spontaneous, and looks outward through the senses; the introvertive experience is worked at through discipline, and looks inward into the mind. He calls the extrovertive experience "the Unifying Vision," and the introvertive experience "the Unitary Consciousness" (p. 131). This is Wilber's (1980a, 1980b, 1993) *low-causal* level of consciousness, a state of consciousness that represents the pinnacle of God-consciousness, where one dissolves into Deity. This is the stage where "all objects of experience dissolve and there is left only pure consciousness" (Walsh, 1992, p. 29).

Ultimate level. This is Wilber's highest realm, the *high-causal*, and it is said to be "the final realization of enlightenment":

Consciousness is said to have awoken and to see itself in all things; to recognize itself in and as all worlds, realms and beings of the universe; unbound by space, time and limits of any kind because it creates space, time and limits; both transcendent to the world and fully immanent as the world (Walsh, 1993, p. 128).

One has moved successively through the veils of illusion which stand between the less real and the more real, until finally the ultimate essence of reality is reached, what Johnson (1953) has termed "the imprisoned splendour."

CASE STUDIES

The following six case studies are presented as a brief overview of the primary source of data used in this study.

Case No.1: John

John, age 63 at the time of the interview, is a retired engineer. His engineering career was spent with an aerospace manufacturing company. As a field representative for this company, he has traveled all over the world. John grew up on the East coast, with a father who had a strong influence on him. His father, a respected Boston lawyer, was deeply involved in astrology, which was practiced as a "high art" in his family. John was raised with this as a backdrop to his entire life. His father was able to predict things which "came to pass," apparently far beyond what could be explained as chance. Coinciding with this influence of his father and astrology was an intense lifelong interest in science. However, John was unable to reconcile the conflicting views of reality presented by these two fields.

John spent three years in college, and then was drafted into the army. Following his discharge from the army, he got a job at a Detroit auto factory in order to save money for school. All his spare time was spent reading anything and everything on science that he could find, with questions about astrology versus science still primary. He had just been laid off from his job, with time on his hands, when he had a transcendent experience at the age of 23. John was reading a book which appeared to bring together astrology and science. The impact of this realization, that he was discovering a possible convergence between science and astrology, opened some inner door for him. His transcendent experience followed, and he experienced the order in the universe. At the moment of reading a particular passage, John thought, "My God ... here's somebody apparently saying it's really true!" and then his extended experience began to unfold. Now, 40 years later, John is writing a book, an "endless rediscovery," in which he is exploring the meaning of this experience, and how he understands it. He describes this experience as one of "unity" and of the "order of things," as an experience of "seeing the answer to any question in terms of the whole." Over the two weeks of this experience, John's world would reform, coming to rest upon an entirely different foundation. Formerly fixed concepts such as time and space dissolved and reformed. Regarding this experience, John writes:

[It was] as though conscious mind was suddenly and forcibly shoved aside, now only a passive witness, looking back, speechless to what was unfolding.... Time and space, matter and energy, even these fixed stars moved from their constellations to become part of the new imagery and were lost in the whole. The cascade of imagery rushed on and on through the hours of the afternoon and evening as I clung to the impressions, scarcely daring to breathe lest the bubble burst, through fitful sleep and on into the following days as the imagery slowly faded. I tried to write it all down, make notes where I could, but there were no words for the whole—no handle by which to grasp it, or even begin to express its unity. My impression was of a complete new reality in which for a time I could "see" the answer to any question in terms of the whole.

This experience was an inner vision. John describes it as "almost tactile." It was seen as "bright golden shapes" that were joining, and "where they joined told me how everything related." When the vision finally came to an end, John would never be the same again. As he expresses it, "when it was all done with, everything had settled back, and houses looked like houses, and people looked like people, and everything was back—but I wasn't in the same place anymore."

Noetic Quality. The noetic quality of John's experience was the direction of his attention to "the coherence and integrity, the single order of the whole." He had no doubt that he "had seen into the center of things." The beginning point was of seeing and understanding *unity, order, and everything in relationship*:

I "saw" the relationship of everything to everything, in terms of shapes, a topology of surfaces showing relationships in their connections. The whole was there as one. The order of all experience is a unity-singular. *Order* and its *expression* are the two sides of perceived duality. Duality is simply a necessary cognitive mode.

Whereas previously John had had the impression that "the 'great questions' are inherently 'unknowable.:'" now, through his experience, he "realized that the universe

and our place in it is both comprehensible and immensely positive and meaningful," and that "we will eventually understand all that is relevant to our condition, and the knowledge will transform us into an incredible quality of existence."

Life Impact. The initial impact of the experience was a change in his college major, from philosophy to engineering. Following his transcendent experience, philosophy seemed irrelevant, but engineering was something practical and clear-cut. The ongoing impact of the experience was to launch John on a life-long quest for understanding. While his external life involved travel and adventure in many countries, his inner life was entirely focused on the search for anything which would shed light on his transcendent experience. Currently, since retirement, all of John's attention is focused on writing about the implications and understanding of what he experienced in those two weeks, forty years ago. With regard to the importance of this experience to his life, John says:

I have tried abandoning it, [through] a variety of diversions over a 40-year period. Now retired, I feel driven to get it down on paper; bring together all my impressions. I could not escape. I was always watching science, looking for clues to find words for what I had seen. "It" was the only really important thing that ever happened to me.

The overall meaning of John's life is drawn from this experience. He says that it "defined for me the relationship of human life to the rest of the universe," and that "it has entrained all, or nearly all, of my creative energies. **It** is the only thing that I take really-i-really-c-seriously." He says that "far and away ... the experience defines my personal sense of meaning and worth."

Case No.2: Carole

Carole, age 51 at the time of the interview, lives in Canada. During her years of growing up she lived in various places around the world because her father was a doctor with the United Nations. Her religious background was in the Anglican church, and as an adult, Carole had a traditional, and what she terms "unconscious," marriage. Her husband was a busy executive, and they lived in an elite part of the city with their two daughters. Along with the busy life of a wife and mother, Carole was a fashion writer for a large city newspaper, and a free-lance writer for a large city glossy magazine as well. Coinciding with this busy outer life was a not-quite-defined inner searching, a strong sense that there was some important purpose to her life that she had not as yet discovered. Several years before her transcendent experience, she had begun to work with meditation as a means of bringing some relaxation into her very active life. Through meditation, change had begun in Carole's life. She left her work as a fashion writer and began to work with a physician as an electrodiagnostician and treatment technician.

Carole's transcendent experience happened at the physician's office one morning. She had arrived early in order to prepare things for the day, and was busy working when she had an external vision of an angel:

I looked up. and there was a warm glow at the end of the room. This light became stronger and stronger and stronger. And through the light, I saw this aurora borealis-like shimmering

guardian angel presence. It was all light. And yet a very, very strong presence of love. I knew it was my guardian angel. I knew I'd probably had this presence all my whole life. I knew right away exactly what it was, and I wasn't one bit scared. . . And the first words that I heard were."Behold, *the* angel." I heard *that* in my *mind*. It was like a sweet Yoke, a gentle voice, in my mind.... I felt it was directly from the angel. ... And it was: "Will you do my work?" And I was just thinking, "But of course. Whatever it takes, whatever it is, whatever is needing to be done. Yes." And just being spellbound in this total place. And then, gradually, this wafting and shimmering went back, and the room [returned to normal].

So this lasted a very, very short period of time. But immediately, then, the cornucopia of gifts came. After that, I was totally directly linked to an inner voice that was always, from that moment on, loving and kind and always present. And always there with the exact message, however long, however short. It was there.

But at that moment, now, there was a heightened state of awareness. This was a very short thing. It was like one of those encapsulated moments where you see everything, and you *know*. You know *there's* another realm of existence. Right then *and* there. And, so, I closed off, but my heart was pounding. I was very warm. Very, very warm. And wishing that somebody was with me, that I could explain this to. And that was the hard thing, because who could you tell this to?

Immediately following the vision of the angel, Carole was in a state of awe, and had what she considered an added gift. She felt drawn to a bouquet of anthuriums, and upon going over to it, heard beautiful flute-like music coming from it. Then the morning's patients started to come, and she had to "get back on the ground and be practical. "

Noetic Quality. One major aspect of the noesis in Carole's experience was the knowledge that there was work that she could do, the "angel's work." This was a confirmation of Carole's long-time sense that there was something in life that she was to be doing. Another aspect of the noesis was the strong unceasing link to the inner guidance, the inner voice, that began at that time. In addition to the noesis related directly to the angel's charge, there was also immediate knowledge related to a completely new perspective on life. Carole became immediately aware that every person who came into her life was a messenger, bringing something to her. She became immediately aware of what "life is all about," the interrelatedness of everything, that "everyone has a unique place in the universe." In addition, Carole began immediately to have a "knowing" about what problems patients had, and what treatment *would* be most effective. She became what *is* currently termed a "medical intuitive."

Life Impact. It took Carole about a year to stabilize the immense impact of knowing that came through the experience. She spent much time in inner process, what she terms a "retreat time," and in focusing consciously on being a "loving, healing presence," which was her initial perception of the angel's work.

Following this, there was a one-year phase of much change in Carole's life, including divorce and leaving the clinic to begin her own work. During this time, she also published a book and created personalized relaxation tapes and tapes for children and families to help them through difficult times. Carole says that the images and words

that she uses on these tapes come to her spontaneously, as if something "banks up beside my right side, and it just starts to flow out."

Then an accelerated phase began which has been extremely productive. It began with an internal vision which seemed to be a furthering of the "angel's work." Early one morning, in a state similar to a waking dream, Carole saw many, many children crying and begging for help. Then she saw little angel dolls floating down and into the up-reaching arms of the children. The little angel dolls were saying, "I'm your little angel, I've come to be with you. I've come to tell you how wonderful you are, and how special you are." This vision resulted in the creation of an angel doll and four different audio tapes to be used with the doll, specifically for helping children through difficult times. Carole had a great sense of urgency about creating these dolls and tapes, and strongly feels that the vision of the crying children which she saw was a "pre-vision" of the children affected by the bomb explosion in Oklahoma City. Following the bombing, Carole was contacted by concerned people who saw to it that approximately three hundred dolls and accompanying tapes were given to the children in Oklahoma City. Additionally, thousands more angel dolls and tapes have been distributed nationally and globally.

This third phase also included a blossoming of creativity in Carole's life, with painting, public speaking, lyrics for songs, the use of humor, topics for continued writing, and work with family relationships. Carole feels that the transcendent experience precipitated "a 180° turn" in her life. The experience of seeing the angel, and the subsequent guidance in doing the angel's work, have brought an intense sense of purpose and life meaning to Carole. As she expresses it: "It's almost as if heaven had sent me down to earth with a mission." Currently, Carole continues her production of the angel dolls and tapes, and her work as a medical intuitive.

Case No.3: Jennifer

At the time of the interview, Jennifer was working as a nurse, her profession for almost twenty years. She lives in the country with her second husband and two children. At the time that Jennifer's transcendent experience happened, she had just separated from her first husband, was negotiating a divorce, and was in therapy. Jennifer's therapy had been helpful in the resolution of divorce issues, and she continued the therapy around personal and work issues. Jennifer feels that the therapy relationship may have acted in some way to prepare her for her transcendent experience, and that the timing of the experience was understandable. As Jennifer says, "I was definitely in a pretty open space. It was a good time for things to happen. If the universe ordains things, it was the perfect time."

Jennifer's transcendent experience happened one evening, after she had put her children to bed. It began with what she has termed "a crack in consciousness."

I was putting my two children to bed (ages 11 and 7 years). I was in the habit of laying down with one of them—they shared a room—until they were asleep. It was peaceful, ordinary. No one else was in the house. Suddenly I felt as if I was in a rock, inside, and then the rock

cracked with an ear-splitting sound and revealed a crystal. I was in the center of the crystal-multifaceted light. Lovely. Then a goddess-looking woman came from far off in the center and said, "I am you." I said, "No." She said, "Yes." I stayed there for a while. When I came back to the bedroom-things were different-space was different, things were luminous. Time seemed physical, yet suspended. I felt agitated. Restless. Scared?

I went for a walk. (I live in the country and was in the habit of taking walks at night.) I walked down the road past a row of large maples and scuffed at the leaves. I could hear the trees talking, the animals talking, people talking-the sound of the universe singing to itself. Dancing. I was everywhere at once. I was me, but I was bigger than me. I knew the answers to all the questions. I knew why it all was the way it was. I just knew. Altered perception went on a long time (one to two hours). I went to bed with the singing in my head.

I didn't have a name for that experience. I was awed and at peace and scared as well. It was big. Bigger than a dream or a wish or a fantasy. It was real.

While the total experience itself lasted for about two hours, the experience of "the universe singing to itself" has never left Jennifer:

It went on for a long time.... A long time. You *see*, I don't remember any real particulars after that. I think I went to bed. But, this *sound* . . . it's never left. It wasn't an experience that felt like I had it and then it was over. I've heard other people say things like they really want to get back there. It wasn't like a "trip." It completely changed me forever. It was like this giant crack. and ... I got used to it.

Noetic Quality. As Jennifer says, "I knew the answers to all the questions. I knew why it an was the way it was. I just knew." Jennifer's transcendent experience, and especially the noetic quality of "knowing the reason for everything," changed Jennifer's perception of the world permanently. Essentially, in that moment in time, she *knew* the "answers to life's questions-Why are we here? What are we doing? How does it all relate? Why does it matter?" While she can't say exactly what the answers are, or what she suddenly *knew*, she says, nevertheless, that "that knowledge figures in my choices and decisions." When asked to describe the noetic quality, the *knowing* contained in her transcendent experience, Jennifer struggles to express it, likening the experience to the koans of Zen Buddhism, which are difficult for the mind to grapple with:

What's it close to? You know, like if you have a question all your life: "Why are we here?" And you really wonder about it, every now and then. It's getting the answer to that one. But you don't really *have* the answer. You couldn't tell anybody why are we here, because the answer is "because we are." And you go around in this circle. It's like reading Zen stuff, that drives you crazy. But once you understand it, you *get* it, on another level. ... So, it's a very deep sense of inner peace, is what it is. There's nothing to *say* about it. Because it's all *knowing*. But, it was just more like: "Well, gee, this is the way things work. This is why things are the way they are." So, on the one hand, you don't know any more. You really don't feel like you know any more afterwards than you did before. But your level of understanding is different,

Jennifer states that this is *not* an "intellectual" knowing. Somehow, there is a Circumventing, or by-passing, of that level so that another level can be accessed.

Life Impact. The first stage of impact on Jennifer's life was a time of integration of the transcendent experience through her work in therapy. The initial need for her to seek therapy had mostly been met by the time of her transcendent experience. However, because she trusted the therapist, she also was able to talk to him about her experience. Fortunately for her, he had some knowledge of such experiences and was able to recommend helpful reading to her. He termed her experience a "peak experience," Maslow's term for transcendent experience. From that point on, her therapy revolved around the experience and its aftermath in her life, and fortunately her therapist was neither afraid of, nor awed by, her experiences. His matter-of-fact responses were invaluable to her. The initial impact of her experience was simply a settling in to *be* with it, and to stay in the profession that she had been in for some time, and in which she could function well during the integration.

The on-going aspect of life impact has been a marked continuance of noesis. As Jennifer has stated, it is as if things cracked open, and did not shut all the way again. This includes on-going dream experience and an enriched inner life, as well as experiences of noesis (knowledge), which Jennifer terms "knowledge for knowledge's sake." As Jennifer says:

There's this really clear line about these things, that this kind of knowledge is not about your private life. That it's not about asking questions like "What should I do with my life? What should...." And it's not even about praying for anything to happen. It's been absolutely clear to me that it is not a venue for asking questions about this life, You know, you've got to figure that out yourself. If there's questions to be asked, it's that they're not for any gain in anything.... It's kind of like knowledge for knowledge's sake.

This second stage of impact, the time of integration, has been invaluable for Jennifer. It has included becoming comfortable with, accustomed to, in balance with, the rich inner life that has continued to come through the door which never fully closed following her transcendent experience. All of this work has been an inner process, a fundamental work of reorganization, a "reorientation of priorities," which she feels has probably not really been perceptible to other people. Perhaps it could be termed a time of apprenticeship to "knowledge for knowledge's sake."

While this inner process is still on-going in Jennifer's life, she is now in a third stage. This is marked by the pronounced need to "do something with" the noesis, the knowledge. Jennifer's deep urge to communicate out of her experience has continued to grow. She has chosen writing as an avenue of expression, a choice which grew out of her use of writing during therapy. She wants to write fiction, especially screen writing. The theme that presses on her is "personal awakening." Currently, Jennifer has left nursing and is focusing all of her energies on her studies, and on preparation for writing.

Case No.4: Fred

Fred, 48 years of age at the time of the interview, has a Ph.D. in transpersonal psychology and works full time in his psychotherapy practice. He grew up in a university town, where his father was a professor at the university which Fred also

attended. He describes himself as quite dyslexic. This created many problems for him throughout his school years, and helped to create a deep sense of inadequacy. By the time he reached college, he was having bouts of extreme depression with feelings of shame and inadequacy, and was deeply struggling with his inability to adequately express himself. Fred left the home-town university after two years, entering another university which offered a very different academic environment. Fred's ambitious decision, on entering this university, was to learn all of Western history. Within two weeks of starting there, Fred was beginning to reexperience the bouts of depression and self-attack, and exacerbating this was the awareness that he was completely unable to handle the time schedule of studies that he had set up for himself. He began going farther and farther into depression. He discovered that he could partially manage this through extensive walking, which brought a sense of resolution to his inner struggling.

However, Fred's depression grew worse. On the day of his transcendent experience, he remembers walking and walking. Instead of alleviating the pain, it worsened to the point of giving him the certainty of imminent death. As he surrendered into that death, he broke through into some other realm, the realm of the transcendent:

I don't know what happened the day of this big experience, exactly. I just remember walking and walking and walking and walking. And instead of resolving, the depression got worse. It was a sunny day. It was a nice day. And I walked around town. I walked and I walked and I walked. About 3:00 in the afternoon, I got to the big lawn area on the campus, and these terrible wrenching feelings in my guts were coming up. I was certain I was going to die. There was no rational mind left at all. I was clearly going to die. And, it was too painful, You know, I can understand why people commit suicide. It was too much.

So, it started with the thought "I don't want to kill myself, really, but since it's going to kill me, that's cool. I'll just die from it." I just thought, "Okay, I'll let *it* do it to me." I found myself just flopping down on the grass, with one hundred percent conviction that I was going to die. This was it. And I was going to watch and see what happened next. Then something opened up in my chest, and simultaneously in my vision, and that celestial vibration of light [that he had once seen as an infant] started to happen in the grass. And then it got more and more transparent and translucent. And then "*whooh;*" I went through into ... I went through whatever that was. I went through. And *I* was gone.

There was no sensate experience. And I knew everything. I suddenly knew everything. And it was completely a self-referred experience. I not only *knew* everything, I *was* everything simultaneously. Thad the thought, "Well, if I wanted to know anyone thing, I *could* know that. But then I would lose the totality." It was sort of like a revelation of the mystery of incarnation, or of particular versus universal. So I just said, "Okay. I'll just know everything." And I surrendered into that knowing. And there was no light. There was complete void darkness. But **it** wasn't a dark black. It was a light-filled black. I don't know what to say. It was filled with substance. It wasn't filled with emptiness. And so, that experience lasted a few minutes, maybe. I don't know how long.

I think a lot happened to me during those moments that I can't even remember right now. I just communed with the universal knowing and being, as if I *were* the universe I mean, the conviction was absolutely: "*I know everything that is in the universe.* There's nothing that I don't know. And I *know* it." Just this capital K, "I *Know* it." And I was it.

So, then, the light came. The celestial light came back in the grass. And I came back, and I found myself alive. on the grass. And I said, "Well, that's cool" And then a voice came to me, and it was a voice like the "voice of God," It was as clear and audible as any voice that I've ever heard.... And the words were: "Relax, and dig it."

Fred's immediate response to this amazing experience was laughter at the irony he saw in his life:

Isn't that great that God spoke in slang! And so I laughed. And even at that time, I thought it was an ironic commentary on my extreme pain before. Like: "You're making really too much of a big deal of this. You just have to relax and be with life!" That's all there is to it, you know.

Following this transcendent experience, Fred's life became reoriented around his experience. As he says, "It changed my whole outlook. From that moment, I was only concerned with gaining that again and permanently."

Noetic Quality. There are two major aspects to the noetic quality contained in Fred's transcendent experience. The first aspect is the experience of "knowing everything," which quality seems to typify some deep unitive experiences. As he expresses this:

I moved through layers of "material" that was increasingly transparent, and then suddenly I emerged into a night sky of the universe in which I was everything and I knew everything. I literally knew everything there was to know in the universe. It was a state of complete unity, and very simply I was that.

When asked to elaborate on this experience of knowing, he finds it difficult to express, but emphasizes that it was knowing *everything*, versus knowing *anyone thing*;

It is so difficult to say what it was. And, like I emphasized before, it has almost all to do with knowing in a universal sense. And again, like I said, I knew everything that was, all at once. And I knew it intimately, and I knew it down to its minutest detail. So, I knew every being in the universe. I knew every place in the universe. I knew every fact in the universe. I knew every event in the universe that had ever happened. I just knew everything. And I didn't know anyone thing.... And I asked myself the question, in that experience. "Well, do I want to know anyone thing?" And I instantly got the answer was, "You can know anyone thing, but then you won't know everything."

Fred also underscores the difference between this kind of knowledge and our everyday kind of knowledge. As he expresses it: "It was a different category altogether. The knowledge of the experience was transcendent and complete. My immediate, daily knowledge of things was simple and small by comparison."

Following the unitive quality of knowing, there was a second aspect to the noesis, a quality of personal knowing that returned Fred to a sense of duality. This was the voice which spoke into Fred's mind, giving him a very personal message which was of great importance to Fred, to "relax, and dig it." The effect of this was to enable Fred to completely shift his perspective on the pain that he had been going through.

Life Impact. Fred was 21 at the time of the transcendent experience, and was 48 at the time of the interview. The experience has never left him: "That experience lasted a few minutes maybe. I don't know how long. It was certainly forever. It's never left me. I don't think it's ever left me for a minute." However, it has always been something so immense that to articulate it is still difficult. As Fred says, "It really has taken me all these years to feel comfortable talking about it. It was *that other* an experience for me."

The immediate impact on Fred was his awareness of the irony of the contrast between this new reality he had experienced and the pain of his life to this point. Although depressions did continue to come, they were never of the same intensity as before the transcendent experience. While depression and anxiety are a part of Fred's personality structure, they have never again been as severe as that which took Fred to the brink of "death." In a relatively short period of time, Fred made a shift and was able to reorient himself to his school experience. As he says, "I became a normal human being. I stopped worrying about understanding what I was reading, and I began to realize I was learning it; that there was a soul inside of me that was learning something." Fred finished the school quarter but then found that the change he had undergone was so profound that he was unable to continue at the university. It became clear to him that the only reason for our existence on this planet is to access this other realm. This phase was marked by his search for further transcendent experiences. He went to Europe to continue studying Western history and in an attempt to reconnect to the transcendent realm--this time through drug use. Fred did have another transcendent experience after taking LSD. The experience proved to be a turning point for him in that he became aware that the nature of his pursuit of the transcendent had to change. As the experience was finishing, Fred says:

I heard a voice, the same voice. This is good, this time! *[laughter]* This time it said: "You asked for it Here it is. Now get there on your own." And the clear knowledge of, one, this was partly a gift. It was partly also induced by drugs. That I had stormed the gates of heaven, so to speak, with this massive dose of LSD. And a clear grasping of: "Oh, Yeah. I can't do it this way any more. I've got to do it by the hard work of meditation." (At that time, I had started to meditate regularly. I had just started it that summer.)

The LSD experience served as a reorientation point in Fred's life and turned him toward the next phase in which his spiritual quest became more grounded. Meditation was the chosen focus for this next phase, during which Fred became a teacher of transcendental meditation. As he says, this second experience had "confirmed more than ever that there's only one thing worth doing, and that's to Know." This phase was also a time of integration of psychological issues, and of spiritual development, leading eventually to getting involved in the world in a productive and creative way. This stage lasted about ten years, during which Fred found the impact of the transcendent experience to be ongoing, "enduring."

Another phase of Fred's life grew out of this stage of deep immersion in meditation. Fred's transcendent experience became his "permanent internal reference." Because of his long-term interest in psychology, he decided to go to graduate school to study it. His quest for the transcendent had now become integrated into a path of service. Coinciding with his formal study of psychology was his awareness that, based on his

past experiences, he had the capacity to understand and help others. Fred's recent life is marked by an intense immersion in creative art forms including gardening, sculpting, painting, and writing-his writing influenced by aspects of the transcendent experiences. As he says, "I think of this experience daily; it guides me.... It became the foundation for my sense of self."

Case No.5: Anna

Anna was 40 at the time of the interview, and working at a graduate school of psychology in California. She was approximately 26 years of age at the time of her transcendent experience. Born to teenage parents who were unprepared for children, she grew up on the East coast and feels that her mother, especially, really did not want children. Her memories of her childhood are troubling to her, and the overriding feeling that she brought out of childhood was that she "didn't have a right to be here." Anna was on the receiving end of "incessant verbal battering and berating that went on day after day" from her mother. Building on and exacerbating this early and pervasive feeling of not having a right to be here, and of a lack of identity, was the experience of sexual abuse by her father, which was traumatic and led to a great deal of dissociation. These beginnings set in place a life pattern of seeking out abusive and destructive relationships.

At the time that the transcendent experience happened, Anna was a student at an East coast university and living in an abusive relationship. While she was enjoying school, she was also severely depressed and in a great deal of pain, with feelings of low self-esteem and feelings of being "insignificant and invisible." One day during this time, Anna was riding on a bus that happened to be passing by a cemetery, taking in the intense fall beauty of a grove of oak trees on the cemetery grounds, when her transcendent experience happened, leaving her with the knowledge that she had "as much right to exist on this earth as anybody else:"

There was a river on the left of the bus. and on the right was a cemetery. It was during the fall. and the cemetery was full of oak trees. They had all turned this incredible color of gold. The sun was starting to set, and it was hitting the trees. They were just luminous. And I just remember thinking, oh, those trees are so beautiful! And then it was like *who-o-a-f*. ... It was as if my whole consciousness just transcended my ego state. I felt completely filled with peace and love, and just an incredible sense of tranquility. I couldn't form a thought. I didn't have any cognitive abilities. It was just a state. So, it's kind of hard to say for sure how long it lasted, but I know it wasn't too long. Not longer than a minute. From the distance the bus traveled, I have some measure of time.

I remember struggling against the state, because it felt so overwhelming and so unnatural. And then, when I sort of regained my cognitive abilities, this thought was in my mind, that "I have as much right to exist on this earth as anybody else." And it was just so profound for me. It was amazing.

This truth, the knowing with which Anna came out of the transcendent experience, that she had "as much right to exist on this earth as anybody else," was to act as a catalyst in eventually changing her life.

It was such a profound experience. It took me years to integrate the truth into my life, and to break out of the destructive patterns that were dominating my life. But that experience was definitely the catalyst. I don't know if I can say for sure that I wouldn't have made it, but I went through a number of self-destructive phases, from alcoholism to bulimia, and there were times when I definitely considered suicide.

Over a number of years, after many difficult circumstances, she did manage to change the self-destructive patterns in her life.

Noetic Quality. Quite simply, the noetic quality of her transcendent experience gave Anna the sure knowledge that "I have as much right to exist in this world as anyone else." This knowing that came to her in the transcendent experience was in marked contrast with her prior life-long sense of herself. As she says, "It contrasted sharply with my existing perceptions—that life was small, constrictive, pain-filled, dark. I feared life and believed I had no control over my life or my destiny." Again, Anna considers this knowing "a catalyst for me to begin to climb out of the chasm of depression, and to actually begin to live." A second aspect of the noetic quality in Anna's transcendent experience is the sense of "pure love, peace and contentment, with a consciousness as expansive as the universe itself" that Anna experienced before she came out of the experience. As she says, "During the transcendent experience, I glimpsed what it is like to feel peaceful, loved and loving."

Life Impact. Anna likens the transcendent experience to a seed that was planted in her consciousness. There was a two- to three-year period immediately following the experience during which she was unable to break out of her destructive patterns and went to an emotional rock-bottom. However, things began to shift when she began to attend a meditation group, to meditate, and to study metaphysics. Then gradually, it was as if the seed which had been planted in her consciousness began to "really, literally crack open." She discovered that she wasn't powerless and did have some control of her life. Anna's struggle with the recovery process was by no means easy. The root strength to tackle and stay with this process came from her transcendent experience and its message that she did have a right to be on this earth:

Having the universe burst into my private reality and tell me I had a right to exist was very reassuring. During my struggle with recovery, it was a message I returned to many times, almost like a favorite teddy bear. It gave me the strength to forge through years of readings, meditations, self-discovery and affirmations, which gradually led to awareness and increased self-esteem.

Anna had the will to master the destructive patterns in her life. Eventually this led to a phase of balance and creativity, which continues. She lives with intuition as a constant companion. She says "living by the guidance provided by my inner voice is a way of life now."

One significant change in Anna's life now is a release from the depression that was literally paralyzing to her for so many years of her life. The hallmark of Anna's life currently, in a sense a blossoming of the seed that was planted in her life years ago by the transcendent experience, is creativity in the form of writing. At the time of the interview, Anna had completed three short stories, which she was in the process of

sending out for publication, and was working on more. The theme of transcendence is a marked aspect in her stories.

Case No.6: Sophie

Sophie, age 45 at the time of the interview, is an oncology family therapist. She works with the many issues specifically related to severe illness, death, and the dying process. Since the interview, Sophie has moved to the East coast where she is continuing the same type of work in a hospital-based cancer clinic and is teaching in a university.

In her early life, Sophie had dropped out of college. Then, through a gradual sequence of jobs, Sophie had come to feel strongly that her particular path in life was to work with the dying. She returned to school, finished her B.A., and had entered a graduate school of social work in an MSW program, at that time the only one in the country that had a clinical concentration in death and dying. She was in her first year of graduate school and very involved in an internship on the oncology unit of the hospital when her transcendent experience happened. She had discovered she was pregnant, and was immobilized by the devastating dilemma of whether or not to have an abortion, a dilemma that led to a life-changing experience. This experience, along with another, she regards as the single greatest gift in her life:

The month had been one of the most stressful of my 27 years. I had discovered that I was unintentionally pregnant at the same time that I had realized the man I was involved with was cruel. I knew with total certainty that I did not want to share a parenting experience with him. I felt unprepared for motherhood, smack in the middle of a graduate program that was the beginning of a big career push. So I researched my options and made an appointment for an abortion. As the day for the procedure drew near, I became more and more upset. Part of me believed that abortion is murder; part of me believed that abortion is a woman's right. I had been a clear supporter of the choice for women for years. But the part of me that wondered whether I would be committing a murder was horrified by my dilemma.

On the evening before the scheduled abortion, I was driving my car in the city and I began to weep. I had not been able to let down like this, and the grief poured out of me. I did not know what to do. I had never felt myself so torn by a decision, had never felt the weight of a life in my hands. I was in a state of utter surrender and helplessness. I sobbed. I realized that I might hurt someone or myself driving and sobbing, so I pulled the car over to the curb and parked. I sobbed for a long while. Finally, I opened my eyes. The whole car was filled with golden Light so blight that it should have blinded me, but it didn't. I had no sense of my body sitting on the seat, my hair touching my face, my hands on the steering wheel. It was as if I was not a physical being; I was all Spirit. I was not aware of this then, I just WAS the experience. I rested, stunned, in this Light and felt TOTAL peace and love, beyond anything I had ever imagined, flooding through me. I WAS the Light. As I floated in this Light, unaware of anything else, I heard a male voice. With total compassion and clarity it said, as if from the air around me, as if from the Light itself, "Sophie, the baby will be fine either way. What you need to know is that the Love you are receiving is only the Love that you are letting in. The whole Universe of Love is here for you. You're letting in only what you think you deserve. Let in the Love."

I sat in the Light absorbing the message and the Light for-how long??-who knows? Time did *not* exist. But finally, *and* I'd guess about 20 minutes later, the Light slowly began to fade. I sat in utter serenity and utter intensity, all at once. I had been instantly healed; my anguish had vanished. I felt beyond joy-I sat in KNOWING, in complete harmony with the Light, with the voice, with every thing and person I had ever known. Nothing I had ever known felt as important or as sacred as what had just happened to me. I understood forgiveness and Love as I never had before. I sat until I was once again in darkness, But I was filled with the Light.

I could not even talk about the experience until two years later, when I described it to a friend, and even then my words faltered and stuck in my throat, but not in my heart.

I was never the same again. I never forgot the experience, and think of it often. It is the foundation of my spirituality and my work as a family therapist with cancer patients. My conviction that this message is utter truth has never changed. It is the single greatest gift of my *life*, along with another experience in the same Light that happened about five years later.

Noetic Quality. With regard to the noetic quality of her experience, Sophie feels that the transcendent experience took her to a "whole different realm of understanding and KNOWING." There are several aspects to the noetic quality, the *knowing*, contained in Sophie's transcendent experience. First, but not foremost to Sophie, was the answer to the dilemma that brought her to the moment of the transcendent experience. Second, but foremost to Sophie, was the sure knowing of the Light, and the love contained in it. Connected to this knowledge of the Light, was a sense of responsibility. The third aspect of knowledge was the absolute assurance of forgiveness.

At the time of the transcendent experience, Sophie was wholly absorbed in her dilemma about the rightness or wrongness of having an abortion. Contained within the envelopment in Light, love, peace and compassion, was the voice which told her simply and clearly, "Sophie, the baby will be fine either way." Following this experience, Sophie had complete peace about going ahead with the abortion. As Sophie has said, "I had been instantly healed. My anguish had vanished." The first thing that Sophie literally *knew* from the experience was the Light. This became, literally, a part of her. Within this experience of the Light, and the love contained in it, was a knowledge of the absolute necessity to "let it in." The Light exists, and, she felt, it must be allowed to enter our human experience:

I learned that the Light existed. I learned that part of the "human condition" *is* that, blindly, we limit our own experience of receiving the Light, letting in only what we think we deserve. This was not an intellectual experience. This was a spirit experience. And so I learned that I could learn, from outside the intellectual experience, the most important things in my life.... I learned that gifts of this magnitude can be given. I learned that gifts of this magnitude can be received. It expanded my sense of humanity, forever.

Connected to this knowledge of the Light, and the love contained in *it*, is a deep sense of responsibility. As Sophie says, "With being given that gift comes a sense of how special it is. Somehow, because I was given that, it needs to be part of my sense of service to the world." From her transcendent experience, Sophie also understood the

reality of forgiveness, and that it applied to her. There had been severe sexual abuse in Sophie's childhood, and from that she had carried with her a sense of being "bad:"

I learned that forgiveness is real. I learned that it is given freely, without having to be earned somehow. We are all deserving of forgiveness, and are forgiven. I think, especially as an abuse survivor, there was a deep element in me that felt that I was: "bad." I think of forgiveness as something, now, that's closer than breath, the way that love is closer than breath.

Life impact. For Sophie, there was an immediate impact of peace, rightness, complete awareness of the life of spirit, and of being more grounded than she had ever felt before. Additionally, she was able to go immediately forward with the abortion, with no residue whatsoever of her earlier anguish. Another aspect of immediate impact was learning how to "let the Light in," as she had been instructed in the transcendent experience. This began through meditation. Additionally, the experience of the Light immediately gave Sophie a new perspective from which to approach healing from prolonged childhood abuse: "With the experience of the Light, I realized that that was also a part of who I was. I wasn't just the experience of child rape. Although I had been wounded, I was not the wound." She was not "handicapped," as she had come to think of herself. She has understood that, in fact, the healing extends to becoming "weller than well:"

I had thought, coming from a background of terrible abuse, that although I was healing, I would forever be emotionally handicapped. And so the experience of the Light being in all parts of me is, I think, what partly propelled me into recognizing that people cannot merely heal, but spiritually thrive from even a terrible abuse experience [We can become] more than complete, weller than well.

Over the years, Sophie's experience of the Light has permeated literally everything in her life. Her approach to marriage and parenting is deeply connected to her knowledge of the Light, and her work with the dying is influenced by it. She has a story which illustrated this complete orientation to the Light and the love, and which contained a second experience of the Light. She had finished graduate school and was working as a member of a hospice team. She was assigned as a client, John, a street person who was dying of liver cancer. He was terrified of dying, he said, because he had killed 12 people during the years he had been in the Merchant Marine and felt that he could never be forgiven. Because of her experience with the Light, Sophie had an innate sense of how to direct her healing work with John. She intuitively felt that there was "goodness" in him; that the killings had come from some deep pain, some well of rage within him. She helped him to begin to "imagine" what forgiveness would feel like. She enlisted his friends in helping him to accept and "let in" caring and love, and they worked together for some months, practicing. Finally, the time of John's death was at hand, and Sophie convinced him to go into the hospital. She was going out of town for the weekend, but took the time to stop and see John one last time. As she went past the nurse's station, the nurse told her that John would not be able to talk, as he was in a coma. Sophie continued in to John's room and, as she opened the door, she saw the same Light that she had once before experienced. She leaned over John's bed, called his name, and his eyes opened. She said, "John, look what's here for you! Let it in! This is your chance! You did it! You did it! It's here for you! Let it in! You know

how to do that!" Sophie describes how a look of bliss came over John's face, and he lifted his arm and placed it around her neck, kissed her on the cheek, and then died. As Sophie says, "The air went out of him like a sigh of relief and contentment and happiness and *awe*. The Light was just there, shimmering and lovely, and I kept whispering to him to let it all in."

A part of the impact of participating in John's experience, in the Light, was her growing sense that this second experience had happened for a reason. Essentially, she felt that if she was to work with dying people, she needed to *know* that they were forgiven, so that she could "exude that knowledge" in her work with them as they were dying. Sophie has many stories to relate from her work over the years with the dying. It is, she explains, "easy and graceful" for her to work with the dying, because of the "soft edge of love" that she experiences around this process:

It's very *easy* and graceful to talk about dying with people when I have no fear of it, and when I know that Light. It's a graceful process. And because of where I'm coming from, it's never a jolting discussion. It's never, "Do you think you're going to die", or those kinds of things. There's *always* a soft edge of love around every single way that it gets brought up. So that people can speak the unspeakable safely.

Sophie states, very simply: "This remains the most significant experience of my life. . . . This experience opened me to a level of wisdom and peace that has defined who I am. I have set my priorities in life based upon this knowledge. It is the foundation upon which I have *become*."

FINDINGS

In terms of the individuals described in this study, the analysis of the cases shows that these transcendent experiences can have five major themes of impact, and three additional areas of impact of significant but lesser scope. Based on these cases, I conclude that the transcendent experience serves as an entry point for a transpersonal reality to intersect with a personal reality, that the transcendent experience has a significant and valued long-term impact on the life of the percipient, and that the noesis of the experience is a major factor in the significance of that event to the percipient. The themes and aspects of the impact of a transcendent experience with significant noetic quality are as follows:

Major Themes

Important issue. The transcendent experience and its noesis typically address an important life issue of the percipient, giving the percipient a new perspective on, or understanding of, the issue. This new perspective has a profound effect on the percipient's life.

Phases of integration. There are clearly discernible phases of integration of the transcendent experience. The phases are unique to the individual, but in general have to do with (a) coming into balance with the initial impact of the experience, (b)

integrating the experience and its meaning into the percipient's life, and (c) expressing the meaning in some form.

Life significance and life reorientation. The transcendent experience and its noesis have great significance to the percipient and, as a result, both the inner and outer focus of the person's life are reoriented to align with the significance of the event. Also, at some point, inner and outer focus blend together in a single life focus.

Continuance of noesis. There is a continuation of noesis, in some form, in the percipient's life following the transcendent experience—a process of fundamental importance to the percipient. This noesis may come in a variety of forms such as further transcendent-type experience, dreams, inner guidance, knowledge, or intuition.

Creative expression. At some point in the percipient's life, there is a need to creatively express the meaning contained in the transcendent experience.

Additional Areas of Impact

Spiritual. The transcendent experience has a significant effect on the spiritual/religious belief system of the percipient. It acts as a "spiritual catalyst," often precipitating either a change in the belief system or a substantial deepening of the existing belief system.

Psychological/emotional. The transcendent experience and its meaning have a significant impact on the percipient's sense of self, and may catalyze personality change.

Relationships. The transcendent experience has a significant impact on the percipient's family and societal relationships. The effect can range from positive to problematic. A significant amount of social action may be catalyzed either directly or indirectly by the transcendent experience, especially by the meaning felt to be inherent in the noetic quality of the experience.

DISCUSSION

Wherever an encounter with the numinous takes place, the ego is encompassed by the nonego, that is to say, a change takes place in the personality Wherever the mystical element is manifested, the hitherto accepted rigidity of a world ordered around the ego is shattered and a dynamically changed and changing world behind the world is revealed (Neumann, 1968p, 384).

As Neumann points out, the encounter with the numinous (transcendent) brings with it a personal world-change. The person is moved beyond the ego, beyond the personal, into the transpersonal. In the world of professional opinions, there is a wide range of views as to how transcendent experiences are to be regarded. At the one extreme of a reductionistic view, these experiences are often seen as psychopathol-

ogy. On the other hand, a transpersonal view finds that there is often a move toward psychological health and enhanced psycho-social effectiveness. This study supports an interpretation emphasizing psychological health and enhanced participation in life. As Maslow found in his research of peak experiences, and as is echoed in this study, these transcendent experiences may be regarded as among the most important in a percipient's life. In Ahern's study (1990), he found that forty percent of the participants had experienced a "negative to positive" change which was associated with the "subjects understanding their experiences as life turning-points, that is, watersheds leading to underlying long-term internal change, with a sense of before and after which is of high significance" (p.41). Most of the present cases also have evidenced such a reorientation and valuing. Ahern goes on to say that such a change is connected to the "outcome of a change or reintegration of cosmology" (p. 41). This type of reintegration or reorientation is a marked feature of life impact that emerges from the present study.

Thomas and Cooper (1978, 1980) have conducted survey studies in which they used content analysis to ascertain whether reported experiences actually fell into a category that would be termed mystical. The categories of experience they evolved are: uncodable, mystical, psychic, faith, and consolation. The definition they used for qualification of an experience as mystical, into which only two percent of the respondents to their study fell, is as follows:

Response included expression of awesome emotions, a sense of the ineffable, feeling of oneness with God, nature, or the universe. May also have included description of changed perceptions of time and surroundings and a feeling of "knowing," coupled with a reordering of life priorities (1978, p. 435; 1980, p. 79).

It is important to note that all of the present case studies fall solidly into this category, in at least a significant portion of the experience. I believe that by stressing the noetic quality, this study has drawn respondents whose experiences more specifically fit into the category of mystical, or transcendent.

Noetic Quality of the Experience

This study has demonstrated that for the individuals interviewed there is a strong association between experienced long-term internal psychological change and the noetic content, that which became *known* in their experience. James (1961) has said that "mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge," and that the experiences "carry with them a curious sense of authority for aftertime" (p, 300), This authority, which correlates to the noetic quality, is strongly evidenced *in* this study. Percipients have literally reorganized their lives around the felt authority of their experiences. They have experienced the extended world view that James refers to:

As a rule, mystical states [are] ... gifts to our spirit by means of which facts already objectively before us fall into a new expressiveness and make a new connection with our active life.... There never can be a state of facts to which new meaning may not truthfully be added, provided the mind ascend to a more enveloping point of view. It must always

remain an open question whether mystical states may not possibly be such superior points of view, windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world (James, 1961, p. 335).

With regard to the noetic quality of a transcendent experience, it is important to note that there are other means through which noesis enters a person's life and effects change. This is a gradual process, as opposed to the suddenness of the transcendent experience. This gradual awakening has been termed "the 'soft touches' of mystery" by one person:

Put simply, many people experience a very different relationship to noesis than these reported cases of dramatic noetic experience. My own spiritual pilgrimage has not been through such a major, life defining experience, but rather through numerous experiences over many years, more the "soft touches" of mystery (Judy, April 1997, personal communication).

This would seem to be the distinction that James (1961) makes in his reference to the "once-born" and the "twice-born" (p. 143). He terms the world of the once-born to be a "rectilinear or one-storied affair," while the world of the twice-born is "a double-storied mystery" (p. 143). The once-born accesses the mystery through a subtler form of on-going noesis in life, which noesis gently shapes the life of the percipient; the twice-born accesses the mystery through the impact of the noesis of the transcendent experience, which changes the world-view in an immediate and sudden fashion. However, the end results may be the same. As Judy (1997) goes on to say: "I nonetheless found the discussion very confirming of my less dramatic 'gradual awakening.' In other words, I found that there were shared elements in my less dramatic experiences with the experiences reported in the study." It would appear that, however noesis may enter a life, the life impact may be similar.

Psychopathology Versus Mental Health

One of the major areas of controversy around transcendent and mystical experience is whether it falls into the area of psychopathology or into the area of enhanced mental health. This is a valid point, as there are similarities between some psychotic or schizophrenic episodes and some aspects of transcendent experiences. The differences between the two states, however, are significant. Important work differentiating the two states has been done by Buckley (1987), Lukoff (1985, 1988), and Wapnick (1969).

It is interesting to consider, in the light of this study, the conclusions drawn regarding the mystic by the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry in their study on mysticism (1976, pp. 785-786). These conclusions are:

- 1) He is an individual who finds living within his society stressful.
- 2) He retreats from his society and the reality which it sponsors by withdrawing his interest from both and by reinvesting that interest in impressions which arise from within.

The individuals in this study, in an individual timing, ultimately all moved toward greater engagement with society, and a need to contribute to society.

3) He takes advantage of his ability to retreat to the psychic position that existed during his infancy when the only reality which had access to his consciousness was the reality of inner sensation.

While there was a continuance of noesis in the percipients' lives, there was no retreat from reality; rather there was a deepened understanding of reality which led to major life change and greater engagement with society.

4) He reinforces his retreat and overcomes the loneliness which it would create by joining with others to form an elite, democratic, and abstemious mystical fraternity.

The percipients in this study did not, with one exception, join with others, or indeed, even speak of the experience for years. The one *exception* who did draw on outer support used it in a way to facilitate the engagement with society which came out of the experience.

5) He claims authority for his departure from, or rebellion against, the religious establishment by asserting that he has been granted immediate experience of the divine which supersedes traditional authority.

With the percipients in this study, there was no rebellion against religious authority. Rather there was a facilitation of an inner authority which brought them into a new and expanded relationship with what might be termed the Divine, each in a unique way. In one case, it led the percipient back to her traditional Anglican roots for greater understanding of her experience. Again, the outcome of this for all the percipients was ultimately toward greater participation in the world in the ways espoused by all the spiritual disciplines of the world.

The final conclusion reached by the Group was that "from one point of view all mystical experiences may be regarded as symptoms of mental disturbance, and from another, they may be regarded as attempts at adaptation" (p. 816). In contrast, this study demonstrates that the transcendent experiences led to enhanced psychological functioning, and took the percipients way beyond "adaptation" into the hard work of integration and manifestation in the world.

Noble (1984) investigated the relationship between transcendent experiences and psychological health/maturity. She concluded that "transcendent experiences in themselves, far from being regressive, psychotic, or delusional, are potentially powerful agents of integration and transformation that may significantly enhance our psycho-social effectiveness, and thereby contribute to our survival as a species" (p. 99). The present study, through looking at the impact of these experiences over time, supports Noble's conclusions.

Impact of Transcendent Experience

Van Dusen (1990) has stated that: "In even a mystical sense the critical issue is what fruit the experience bears in the individual's life. The fruit is its substantiality" (p. 177). This study has demonstrated that the transcendent experiences described here have borne substantial fruit in the percipients' lives in terms of their success in

bandling difficult life experiences, and leading to social action and creative expression. There has been marked positive long-term impact.

There are two applicable presentations of studies of long-term impact in the near-death experience literature (Ring, 1984; Sutherland, 1995). In his study of after-effects of near-death experience, Ring hypothesizes that the near-death experience "serves as a catalyst for spiritual awakening and development" (1984,p. 51).He notes the following changes:

After NDEs, individuals tend to show greater appreciation for life and more concern and love for their fellow humans while their interest in personal status and material possessions wanes. Most NDErs also state that they live afterward with a heightened sense of spiritual purpose and, in some cases, that they seek a deeper understanding of life's essential meaning. Furthermore, these self-reports tend to be corroborated by others in a position to observe the behavior of NOERs (Ring, 1984, p. 51).

One of the most in-depth studies of the after-effects of the near-death experience is that conducted by Sutherland (1995). Her exhaustive study, using grounded theory methodology, identified many after-effects of near-death experience. The present study parallels many aspects of Sutherland's and Ring's findings. She mentions, for example, the impact on personal relationships, which corroborates the finding of this study that the transcendent experience can have a problematic, as well as beneficial, effect on relationships.

A major finding in Sutherland's study was the identification of what she terms the "integration trajectory," which describes how the experience is integrated into the experiencer's life. She states, "Experiencers appear to follow what I have called an 'integration trajectory' beginning immediately after the NDE and continuing until they feel the experience to be an integral part of their lives" (p. 205). Sutherland suggests that:

Integration can be said to have occurred when the trajectory and biography of the near-death experiencer are congruent. That is, there comes a time when the experiencers recognize (often in retrospect) that their NDEis now a part of their lives, congruent not only with their attitudes but also their actions (p. 205-206).

Sutherland's "integration trajectory" may be another way of conceptualizing what I have identified as the phases of integration. The congruence that she refers to then would be this study's third phase of integration, and the point of "blend" in life reorientation where the person's inner and outer focus come together.

Hallmarks of Transcendent Experience

An interesting finding of this study is that the transcendent experiences described appear to be characterized by either the quality of *love* or the quality of *knowledge*. Often both aspects are present to some extent, but one will hallmark the experience (e.g., the emphasis on knowledge in John's and Jennifer's experiences, and the emphasis on love in Carole's and Sophie's experiences). This appears to parallel Happold's (1970) findings in his study of classical mysticism. He defined three types

of mysticism, or interconnected aspects of mysticism: *love and union, knowledge and understanding, and action*. Happold defines the third type, the mysticism of action, as not a separate type, but one that originates in the first two and is their expression in the temporal world. Similarly in the lives of the participants in this study there was a need to express the meaning of their experience in the world in some form of action that would directly or indirectly be helpful to others. This was the case, whether the characterizing aspect was love or knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Ring (1984) and Bucke (1969) have speculated that the transcendent experience may have an evolutionary implication. Ring (1984, p, 255) asks:

May it be that NDErs-and others who have had similar *awakenings-collectively represent an evolutionary thrust toward higher consciousness for humanity at large?* Could it be that the NDE itself is an evolutionary mechanism that has the effect of jump-stepping individuals into the next stage of human development by unlocking spiritual potentials previously dormant? Indeed, are we seeing in such people-was they mutate from their pre-NDE personalities into more loving and compassionate individuals-the prototype of a new, more advanced strain of the human species striving to come into manifestation?

The present study demonstrates a significant shift in the lives of people who have experienced a transcendent experience. Perhaps such changes in life orientation indicate an evolutionary direction similar to that suggested by Ring and Bucke.

Implications

The present cases illustrate the ways in which lives may be impacted by a transcendent experience that has a strong component of instantaneous knowledge, i.e., *noesis*. Beyond these defined effects are implications regarding the meaning of what has been called the "timeless moment" with its accompanying flash of illumination. These experiences suggest there may be two worlds in human experience, one seen and one unseen. We live our ordinary existence in the seen world; but momentarily, in transcendent experiences, the unseen world intersects with the ordinary world. This momentary blending of the visible and invisible worlds does not leave the experiencer untouched. That person may be reoriented from a conventional sense of reality to a new sense of reality, the "dynamically changed and changing world behind the world" of which Neumann (1968, p. 384) speaks.

The transcendent experience engages a life issue that seems to serve as the vehicle for the entry of the transcendent, the unseen realm, into the experiencer's everyday reality. It is as if the entry of the transcendent is actually more important to the percipient than the original issue or circumstance. Once the transcendent realm has opened some inner awareness, the experiencer then gains a new perspective on the original issue. From this new perspective, in turn, more and more of the everyday reality is viewed differently, and the transcendent experience then becomes a focal point of change in the experiencer's life. Additionally, there is a living quality in the

noesis of the experience. This knowledge, in addition to precipitating a change in perspective, also continues to influence the personality, eventually leading to the need for expression in the world. The person may then begin to move away from the separate sense of self toward a feeling of being more connected to humanity. An understanding can develop, confirming that what has become known through the experience has relevance beyond the personal self.

When I have contemplated these transformative accounts that have been shared with me, two aspects stand out. One is *truth*. There is a quality of truth that, while personal in the experiencer's life, also seems to strongly touch other people's lives. The other aspect is the sense of being on *holy ground*. As I have worked with the transcendent experiences people have shared with me, I realize that I have been allowed to enter the central core of *who this person is*. The experience and the knowledge, and its impact on that person's life, are at the very center of that person's being. This truly is sacred territory.

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