

Spiritual Emergency: Transpersonal, Personal, and Political Dimensions

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ABSTRACT *According to a transpersonal perspective a spiritual/transcendent reality exists beyond the ego, which includes experiences that transcend a person's temporal and spatial boundaries. From this 'trans' perspective human beings are viewed in a wider context of life. However, it is recognized that people can experience a transformational crisis through engaging in psycho-spiritual development, otherwise termed 'spiritual emergency'. Spiritual emergency can cause a de-adaptation, affecting a person's ability to function in daily life, which could result in a person being misdiagnosed and treated for a mental health condition. The dichotomy of such experiences being indicative of either a spiritual problem or a mental health problem continues to be a contentious issue. However, from a transpersonal point of view spiritual emergency presents a person with opportunities to engage in a process of 'self-renewal'. This article discusses spiritual emergency as a numinous event, highlighting the need for more social-political-spiritual awareness of transformations in consciousness. An autobiographical account of a spiritual emergency is provided to illustrate a long-term trajectory of a spiritual emergency, outlining four propositions for engaging conscious experience through and beyond a transformational crisis. Copyright © 2008 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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INTRODUCTION

According to a transpersonal perspective our essential nature is spiritual (Cortright, 1997). Vaughan (1991) cites the work of Abraham Maslow, who states that each human being has spiritual needs, and these include the impulses for spiritual growth (Vaughan-Clark, 1977). The transpersonal literature recognizes a spiritual/transcendent reality that exists beyond the self (Cortright, 1997; Rothberg, 2003) and includes experiences that transcend a person's temporal and spatial boundaries (Grof, 2000). From this perspective human beings are viewed in a wider context of life (Howard, 2005). However, in the transpersonal literature it is recognized that spiritual emergence could also result in a transformational crisis, which is termed a spiritual emergency (Grof and Grof, 1989). Spiritual emergency can have a

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profound impact on a person's everyday functioning; causing a de-adaptation, whereby a person's identity becomes overwhelmed, disorganized, immensely confused, anxious and could potentially lead to a transitory psychosis (Perry, 1999; Sperry, 2003). The complexity of spiritual emergency is compounded when a transformational crisis is treated as a mental health problem rather than a spiritual problem. This process can be described as disempowering for people in the midst of a transformational crisis (Whitney, 1998). Moreover, denying people the opportunity to fulfil their natural human potential through these transformational experiences highlights the political imperative for considering what constitutes 'legitimate' states of consciousness (Collins and Wells, 2006).

The concept of spiritual emergency is well established in the professional literature (Grof and Grof, 1989; Luckoff et al., 1998; Perry, 1999; Scotton et al., 1996) including authors who have experienced a spiritual emergency and received mental health treatment (Whitney, 1998). From a social-political-spiritual perspective there is a need to represent more case examples of people who have passed through such crises to provide 'transformational narratives', thereby demonstrating the various processes and long-term outcomes of psycho-spiritual development following a spiritual emergency.

Spiritual emergency can take various forms, as discussed by Grof and Grof (1993), however, the focus of this article will discuss the transformational nature of spiritual emergency as an encounter with the numinous; on the basis that whether archetypal (Jung, 1959; Ryan, 2002); mystical (Otto, 1959; Eliade, 1960); or shamanic (Larsen, 1988; Allen and Sabrini, 1997) these types of experiences have a numinous quality. This article discusses the transpersonal nature of numinous experience, which provides a contextual framework for understanding spiritual emergency as a numinous event. The article will briefly discuss the dichotomy between spiritual problem and mental health problem during a transformational crisis. The author then presents an autobiographical account of a spiritual emergency, which illustrates a long-term trajectory of personal transformation from crisis to self-renewal. Finally, four propositions for engaging conscious experience through a spiritual emergency are illustrated; highlighting the need for a politics of consciousness (Collins and Wells, 2006) towards personal and political transformation.

THE TRANSPERSONAL ROOTS OF SPIRITUAL EMERGENCY

Transpersonal psychology developed from its roots in humanistic psychology in the late 1960s (Maslow 1969a, 1969b). Each human being, according to the transpersonal perspective, has a unique threshold for experiencing and perceiving reality (Armor, 1969). The term 'transpersonal' literally means going 'beyond and/or through' the personal boundaries of ego/identity (Rothberg, 2003). Based on their analysis of the literature, Lajoie and Shapiro (1992, 91) offer the following definition for a transpersonal perspective, which is: 'concerned with the study of human beings' highest potential, in relation to unitive, spiritual and transcendent states of consciousness'. They examined 40 citations from the transpersonal literature published between 1969 and 1991 and highlighted the following areas indicative of a transpersonal perspective:

1. States of consciousness.
2. Highest or ultimate potential.
3. Beyond ego or personal self.

4. Transcendence.
5. Spirituality.

However, a more recent transpersonal evaluation considers the developments of transpersonal psychology within the twenty-first century and calls for more links between psychological and spiritual domains with political, social and ecological concerns (Rothberg, 2003).

A transpersonal perspective describes spiritual emergence and the evolution of consciousness (Wilber, 1977, 1996; Walsh and Vaughan, 1993; Rowan, 1993, 2001). This includes how altered states of consciousness are potentially meaningful to people's personal growth (Grof and Grof, 1989, 1991, 1993; Cortright, 1997). However, spiritual emergence can also become a spiritual emergency, whereby a person's ego boundaries become overpowered through encountering transpersonal experiences (Grof and Grof, 1989, 1991, 1993; Watson, 1994; Lucas, 2006). Possible triggers for a spiritual emergency include; surgery, sexual relations, childbirth, near death, transitional stages of life and spiritual practices (Guiley, 1991, 567). And it is recognized that spiritual emergency can temporarily interrupt a person's ability to function in daily life, which can include experiences of feeling overwhelmed and threatened by new spiritual insights that may be philosophically or personally challenging (Grof and Grof, 1991).

Grof and Grof (1989) have identified a cluster of characteristic experiences associated with a spiritual emergency, which include strong inner knowing; visions; feeling an energy presence; hearing voices; connections to plants/trees/animals; losing contact with the material world; feeling at one with the universe; past life memories; out of body experiences and talking in tongues. Many of these nonordinary occurrences were reported in a qualitative study carried out by Ankrah (2002) who explored the experiences of 20 clients being counselled. The participants described having had at least one of the 'nonordinary' experiences identified by Grof and Grof (1989). Ankrah (2002) notes that several participants felt unable to explore the experiences with their counsellors because they received unsympathetic or unhelpful responses, whereas others feared being labelled mentally ill. Davis et al., (1991) have identified that people do not find it easy talking about such transcendent experiences and people are often inclined to dislike and distrust the process (Perry, 1999). Ankrah's (2002) study highlights two important issues. First, some counsellors were unable to respond to clients' experiences or were unsympathetic, which identifies a potential issue of spiritual emergency not being adequately addressed in counselling/psychotherapy training? Second, some participants were worried that they would be labelled mentally ill because of their exceptional experiences. This is a worrying indictment of the unconscious fear and power that mainstream Western psychiatry wields in the popular imagination.

The work of psychiatrist and analytical psychologist John Weir Perry (1999) records the process of 'renewal' in people who have experienced a spiritual emergency. Perry (1987a, 1989, 1992) discusses the dynamic energy of spiritual processes as; attempts to break free from emotional patterns such as, assumptions about the world; the complexes engendered in the family; culture and values. Perry (1999, 35) states that 'The renewal of the self and of its cultural preferences is the core issue, involving one's sense of identity and way of being in the world.' Perry's (1999) observations concerning self-renewal highlight the potential for collective renewal and the regeneration of emergent human potential. Perry

(1987b, 56) states: 'Yet the painful paradox remains that the issues these persons are grappling with are at the same time those that are troubling the collective society.' People experiencing spiritual emergency are representing an important function in the collective through encountering the transformative power of the numinous.

Psychiatrist Stanislav Grof (2000), one of the pioneers within transpersonal psychology who also developed the concept of spiritual emergency; refers to the work of Theologian Rudolph Otto and psychologist/psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung; acknowledging the transpersonal nature of numinous experiences. Grof (2000) indicates that a direct encounter with the numinous level of reality is radically different from the experiences of the material world, whereby numinous experiences do not relate to an individual's previous personal beliefs. In short, Grof (2000) asserts that numinous experiences reflect a direct apprehension of the divine nature of reality, which has been described as transient or 'wholly other' by Otto (1959). It is important to note that encountering the numinous often invokes an attitude of surrender, which can also include an experience of dissolution within personal identity (James, 1982; Tarnas, 2006). Encounters with the numinous can have profound consequences for the psycho-spiritual growth and development within human consciousness, both individually and collectively.

SPIRITUAL EMERGENCY AS A NUMINOUS EVENT

Rudolph Otto's (1959) central premise was that an encounter with the numinous – *mysterium tremendum* (awesome and overpowering mystery) and *mysterium fascinans* (fascinating and captivating mystery) – is active and carries an import of energy. He believed that the numinous had to be posited as a datum of consciousness and asserted that: 'to each numen is assigned a seer and there is none without one' (Otto, 1959, 139). It is the immediate impact of an encounter with the numinous that takes it into direct, lived experience (Hollis, 2003). The experiential axiom that underpinned Otto's (1959) research into the numinous was not concerned with making claims for the numinous as a metaphysical truth; rather, his thesis was based on those psycho-spiritual qualities which are more allied to phenomenal experience (Merkur 1999). This is an important distinction as it emphasizes the primacy of human experience in relation to a transcendent dimension of consciousness. Otto (1959, 132) believed that in the journey of spiritual awakening human beings retrace a process akin to evolution. He goes on to say that this is a: 'hidden "predisposition" of the human spirit'. Otto's (1959) work highlights the relationship of the numinous to consciousness, which has direct consequences for the evolution and growth of the human spirit.

The notion of an evolutionary function of consciousness being connected to the self-actualization of the spirit has been discussed by Wilber (1996), who comments on the psycho-spiritual potential and growth that occurs with increased levels of awareness, in which the role of consciousness is central. However, an encounter with the numinous can bring the transcendent dimension into direct relationship with personal consciousness, which can be both existentially challenging or life enhancing. Otto (1959, 26–27) illustrates two qualitatively different experiences of the numinous that impact on human consciousness:

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing

as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its 'profane', non-religious mood of everyday experience.

It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering. It has its crude, barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious.

The profound nature of numinous experiences are illustrated in research data gathered by Hardy (1979, 20–1) involving 3,000 participants; identifying how transcendent and spiritual experiences impact upon peoples temporal and spatial boundaries. One person said: 'I was suddenly alerted to something that was going to happen. What followed was a feeling of tremendous exaltation in which time stood still.' Another said 'I felt a sense of lightness, exhilaration and power as if I was beginning to understand the true meaning of the whole universe.'

From a psycho-spiritual perspective the numinous was also of central importance to Jung (2000, 134): 'the main interest of my work is not concerned with the treatment of neurosis but rather with the approach to the numinous. But the fact is that the approach to the numinous is the real therapy and inasmuch as you attain to the numinous experiences you are released from the curse of pathology.' Jung's emphasis here is on the approach to the numinous and enabling human beings to become aware of their potential for wholeness. Whilst this article is not representing Jung's theory, it is important to note his contribution and influence, among others, to the evolution of transpersonal theory (Scotton, 1996).

Encountering numinous, mystical or unitive experiences can have a profound impact on people. Among these, Perry (1987a, 1989, 1992, 1999) has described spiritual emergency manifesting as altered states of consciousness, de-adaptation, and possibly a mild to short transitory psychosis. The altered states of consciousness that accompany these experiences can be disorientating but Grof (2000) asserts that a good prognostic indicator is when individuals are able to describe their experiences coherently, despite the content of what they are saying being extraordinary or strange. This is a critical observation because it has been recognized that spiritual emergency can lead to further spiritual growth, enhanced creativity and compassion or a desire to be of service to others (Bragdon, 1990; Guiley, 1991). The experience may also lead to a more fulfilling and renewed way of life (Grof and Grof, 1991; Perry, 1999), however, it has been stated that failure to integrate the experience can lead to a deterioration of mental health (Guiley, 1991). Interestingly, Kane's (2006) research suggests that the only distinguishing feature that separates spiritual emergence from a spiritual emergency is the presence of a crisis. The following case vignette is instructive to the theoretical perspective that is outlined above:

CASE VIGNETTE

In 1994 Edward Whitney MD was found wandering along a beach in his underwear and T-shirt. His experience appears to be infused with the numinous when he reports that he was: 'merging with the electrons in distant galaxies and looking for God' (Whitney, 1998, 547–8). He describes having a lifelong interest in spirituality and this numinous encounter enabled him to reflect on his life, which resulted in a 'deep transformation' full of meaning. However, he was eventually detained in hospital on a '72-hour hold' and tried to explain

on admission that he was overwhelmed by a sense of angelic presences; to which the duty psychiatrist responded that he was experiencing a psychosis and prescribed Risperidone. Dr Whitney said that his experience and the psychiatrist's evaluation were at cross purposes: 'my doctors did not think about the possibility they were seeing a person in the midst of a spiritual emergency; the concept itself was not on their map of reality.' Dr Whitney went on to meet a psychiatrist who understood such nonordinary states of mind and explained that he was experiencing a spiritual/transformational crisis that many people have passed through successfully. He goes on to say: 'If I had accepted the medical model of my experience I would not have survived to tell my tale. Despair would have consumed me.'

SPIRITUAL EMERGENCY: HUMAN POTENTIAL OR HUMAN PATHOLOGY?

It has been argued that current concepts of psychopathology are inadequate to address the complex issue of spiritual emergency (Jackson and Fulford, 1997). This issue continues to be discussed in the professional literature (Littlewood, 1997; Lu et al., 1997; Marzanowski and Bratton, 2002; Brett, 2003). The evolution of 'transpersonal psychiatry' provides a much needed impetus for establishing differential diagnosis and appropriate treatment for those people who need additional support through a transformational crisis (Lukoff, 1996; Lukoff et al., 1996; Scotton et al., 1996). Furthermore, these developments are underpinned by the American Psychiatric Association (1994) Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM, 4th edition), which now includes a non-pathological category for religious and/or spiritual problems in response to developments associated with spiritual emergency (Lukoff, 1985; Lukoff et al., 1992; Lu et al., 1997; Lukoff et al., 1998; Lukoff, 2006). It is being argued in this article that spiritual emergency should not only reflect individual cases; it has to connect to the wider collective values towards states of consciousness that are given 'legitimacy' and those which are pathologized (Collins and Wells, 2006). For example, Lukoff (2006) compares spiritual emergency to the normal reactions encountered in a bereavement process, whereby a person's experience of loss may meet the diagnostic criteria for a major depressive illness, but this is not given due to the symptoms resulting from a normal and expected reaction. Lukoff (2006) is emphasizing that a person in the midst of a spiritual emergency could be experiencing a normal process of development resulting in a transformational crisis.

In 2006 mental health service users organized a national conference within a UK National Health Service (NHS) Trust: 'Spirituality, mysticism and mental health: recognising and supporting spiritual crisis in the mental health system.' (Norfolk and Waveney Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust, 2006). The speakers – many of whom had been mental health service users – movingly described their ordeals with the mental health establishment. They outlined the complexity of altered states of consciousness associated with spiritual emergency from their personal experiences and called for more recognition of transformational crises within mental health treatment. Western culture appears to be attempting to engage with healing processes associated with spirituality more seriously (Collins, 2007; Spiritual Crisis Network, 2007), however, there is still very little awareness within mainstream health care contexts of the support required in order to assist a person experiencing a spiritual emergency (Dass, 1989). It has been suggested that compassionate

understanding may be more helpful than a highly technical psychiatric intervention derived from a limited model of understanding of human potential and development (Fahlberg et al., 1992). The political emphasis here relates to the support required to help a person through a transformational crisis, and to support transitions in self-renewal.

According to Webster (2005, 5) questions relating to 'what am I?' and 'who am I?' are 'spiritually embedded in a purpose for one's life.' The process of transformation in a spiritual emergency could be viewed as part of this spiritually embedded purpose towards self-renewal (Perry, 1999) recognizing that developmental transitions occur through and/or beyond ego-identity (Washburn, 1990; Kaspro and Scotton, 1999). However, it is understood that encounters at a transpersonal level have the potential to overpower fragile ego structures (Grof and Grof, 1989, 1991). Human growth involves transitions that reflect possibilities for transformation (Grof, 1985), which also goes beyond a well-adjusted, productive, conventional sense of self (Fahlberg et al., 1992). The next section will outline the author's autobiographical account of a spiritual emergency.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY: ENCOUNTERING THE NUMINOUS AND A SPIRITUAL EMERGENCY

It has taken me over 20 years to get to the position where I can write about the following experience. In 1986 I had lived for just under three years in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastic College. I worked as a layperson on the building restoration team in exchange for teachings from the resident Geshes (Tibetan Buddhist Teacher); three meals a day; lodgings; and a small allowance. I took a small number of Tantric initiations (meditation) and was engaged in studying and meditation practice. I did not travel much during my stay; however, one time I made a long train journey to visit some friends. On the train I spent my time either reading Buddhist literature or reciting mantra (meditative repetition of syllables). It was whilst reciting mantra that I had a heightened sense of compassion for the people sitting on the train. As I looked around the carriage this feeling of compassion grew and developed into an experience of love. The experience was extraordinarily blissful and beautiful; however, I remembered my teacher's advice not to dwell on such states but rather let them pass. Despite my attempts not to dwell on this heightened state of consciousness the experience continued to grow stronger. By the time I got off the train I was immersed in an experience of love and reverence for all forms of life, both animate and inanimate; discarded rubbish on the street was sacred and ordinary colours were liminal. My body was experiencing pulsating waves of bliss. I had never experienced anything like this in my life and the effects lasted for just over two days. As the intensity slowly faded away I started to slip into a state that was diametrically opposed to my recent experience. I felt very unsettled and unsure of what was happening to me. If I had not been prepared for the experience that I have just described above, I could never have anticipated what was to follow.

By the time I returned to the community I was experiencing episodes of intense heat around my navel and a corresponding coldness in the lower part of the legs. I experienced a low-level vibration throughout my whole body and a pressure around my forehead, which are characteristic signs of a Kundalini experience (Eliade, 1960; Sannella, 1996; Scotton, 1996). I also experienced paranormal phenomena when on a few occasions objects, such as a cup for example, would suddenly shoot off of a table. Braud (2001) discusses how experiences of 'psychokinesis' reflect extreme cases of human ability and require an

appreciation of how consciousness may function in the physical world. I also became quite disorientated by the powerful nature of the experience (Grof and Grof, 1989; Grof, 2000). Jung (1987) noted that numinous experiences can seize and control the individual, who is always its victim rather than its creator. These transpersonal states can have a profound impact on identity through the processes that Washburn (1994, 1995) describes as an 'ego-eclipsing' dynamic reality. The numinous is recognised as being a potentially important variable within the development of a sense of 'I' (Erikson, 1996) but a transcendent encounter has the potential to take individuals to the limits of their conscious experience, which can also be described as a growing edge (Mindell, 1990).

My experience included strong feelings of agitation. I made an appointment to see the Geshe to explain what I was experiencing in order to gain some help. He recommended that I should not focus too much on the content of what was happening. On reflection I do not think he understood the complexity of what I was experiencing, or indeed, what to do. I was flooded with intense emotions, I had no idea what was happening, and neither did I have any effective way of 'meta-communicating' with the experience (Mindell, 1988). I started to feel revulsion at the iconography in the monastery and I became distressed at these reactions. At the time of my experience there was very little literature on spiritual emergency in the public domain and I was unaware of what to do. I often felt as if I was caught in a conflict between good and evil as discussed by Perry (1999). Extreme thoughts, turmoil and panic would flood into me and due to the profound nature of the experience I was not focusing on my usual interests in daily life. Eventually I had to leave the community and seek refuge in a less stimulating environment, away from people. I had been trying to carry on as usual but the totality of the experiences I have outlined above became too much to manage. Grof and Grof, (1989) assert that in the acute phase of a spiritual emergency that all forms of dynamic inner exploration and spiritual practice are ceased. I went to live in a quiet part of north Wales during the most extreme part of the process.

Edinger (1984, 123) said that an encounter with a numinous experience might have a 'pulverizing effect'. And this was true of my experience, I did not know what to make of the situation I found myself in and my confusion served to compound the feelings of fear and terror that I was confronting. Everything I was experiencing appeared to be the antithesis of the mind training and study of spirituality that I had recently engaged in. I had no idea what was going on. One of my saving graces was having made friends with an older psychologist from India, who had visited the Buddhist community. He had previously been in a very close working relationship with Krishnamurti and suggested that I try and let the process unfold naturally and to develop *choice-less awareness*, a term used by Krishnamurti. His kind, patient, warm, and caring attitude helped me to believe that what I was experiencing was a natural process which needed to unfold in its own time. I am indebted to the compassion that my friend showed me. It was his attitude to what I was experiencing that gave me the strength to work through the process. I told no one else about the experience that I was going through and tried to get through the process as best I could, alone.

I was fortunate that in the 1980s people in the UK could claim social security and an accommodation allowance with no pressure to get a job. It took me two years to eventually work through the worst of the spiritual emergency and the aftermath of the psychological disturbance that it triggered in me. The process had brought to the fore the fragility of my

early ego development and attachments that had resulted from adoption and a sequence of emotional disturbances during childhood, which had constellated personal complexes that needed working with. Much of my recovery and self-renewal involved understanding and reevaluating strong emotions connected to my early life experiences. Clements (2004) has commented on how spiritual growth often requires revisiting and working with unfinished psychological issues of earlier ego-developing levels. I studied process oriented psychology from 1996 to 2005, which provided me with an extensive training about psycho-spiritual interventions; it also enabled me to pick up the individuation process that arose from my own encounter with the numinous.

In my experience, Jung (1995, 86) was correct when he stated: 'I cannot conquer a numinosum, I can only open myself to it, let myself be overpowered by it, trusting in its meaning.' Since 1986 I have engaged a life-changing journey of discovery and meaning. In 1989 I went on to study health science at college and then went on to university and eventually qualified as an occupational therapist. I worked within the field of mental health; working in an acute admissions unit, and then specializing in a psychological therapy team. I now lecture in a university within a faculty of health teaching human occupation, mental health, and spirituality. My longitudinal journey from spiritual emergency to a transformative life path has included becoming acclimated to more subtle levels of consciousness, which require attention and care (Bragdon, 1990). My autobiography illustrates how spiritual emergency can directly lead to a deep search for meaning in life.

THE POLITICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS: TOWARDS SELF-RENEWAL THROUGH A QUALITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Hollick (2006, p350) asserts that knowledge gained from the creative power of a spiritual experience is transformative, meaningful and 'attuned to the unfolding of existence'. However, Jung (1964) had already recognized that modern society's one-sidedness favours rational associations to experiences and has a tendency to dissociate from the sacred and irrational. He suggests that we have stripped all things of their mystery and numinosity. He believed that if a modern person had a mystical experience they would be sure to misunderstand its true character and would avoid or repress its numinosity, suggesting that we run the risk of pathologizing our experiences or developing symptoms as a result of our one-sidedness. Jung (1964) raises a central paradox here: how does a society address its cultural one-sidedness towards altered states of consciousness, between 'consensus' and 'nonconsensus' experiences? Mindell (2000).

The autobiographical account outlined above affirms the transitional process of a spiritual emergency following a profound numinous experience and illustrates the long-term trajectory and transformation from crisis to self-renewal (Perry, 1999). This highlights the complex relationship between consciousness and human development involving self-organization and self-creating processes (Combs and Krippner, 2003). Spiritual emergency confronts both the individual and society with expanding parameters for conscious experience; which underscores the realization that self-organization and self-development cannot be divorced from the social-political contexts in which people live. This requires taking a prospective view of a transformational crisis as being a development within consciousness. Four propositions illustrating a quality of consciousness 'through and beyond' a spiritual emergency are outlined below; identifying how building personal capacity can facilitate

consciousness from transformational crisis to self-renewal. However, it must be emphasized that people in spiritual crisis are embedded in a socio-political context; therefore, these propositions are relevant at a collective level as well as personal.

PROPOSITION 1: ATTENTION

People's capacity for attention needs time to adjust following deep transpersonal experiences. Braud (2001) indicates that transpersonal experiences can shift our attention, which can 'open up' our experiences beyond previous levels of functioning. These 'non-consensus' experiences can disturb our established modes of functioning (Mindell, 1988, 2000; Watson, 1994). Attention is needed to facilitate gradual surrender to the process (not always easy) with an understanding that unprocessed/unconscious psychological issues could also be triggered. Being in a low stimulus, safe environment initially (Grof and Grof, 1989) enables a gradual adaptation to the experience (Bragdon, 1990). Being loved or warmly valued – by self and/or other/s – supports the focus of attention.

PROPOSITION 2: AWARENESS

Transpersonal experiences are a path to self-renewal requiring transpersonal awareness. Valle (1998, 273) asserts that transpersonal awareness reflects a radically different way of; being-in-the-world. Engaging self-renewal (Perry, 1999) is a complex process to navigate through a spiritual emergency; requiring a synthesis of developing 'choice-less awareness' (Krishnamurti, 1969, 1973) or 'surrender' (Grof, 2006) and gradually trusting the unfolding process (Mindell, 1988). Self-renewal can include the integration of meaningful occupations that engage and affirm re-emergent identity.

PROPOSITION 3: REFLEXIVITY

People's capacity for reflexivity can be developed to facilitate transpersonal experiences towards self-renewal as a life path. Hunt (1995) equates transpersonal experience of consciousness with the reflexivity of human existence, which Laszlo (2003) describes as: 'Being conscious of being conscious.' Reflexive consciousness includes the development of a 'meta-communicator', whereby individuals can engage their experiences fully through introverted or extroverted use of multi-channelled awareness; visual; auditory; kinaesthetic; proprioceptive; relationship; and world (Mindell, 1988, 1990). Reflexivity enables the gradual development of 'fluidity' within self-consciousness and awareness towards adaptation (Collins, 2001).

PROPOSITION 4: TRANS-REFLEXIVITY

Transpersonal experiences; 'through' or 'beyond' the ego are trans-reflexive when human potential recognizes existence functioning in a wider field of consciousness. Reflexivity includes temporal transcendence (Sandywell, 1996), so I refer to trans-reflexivity as a capacity in human beings for engaging phenomena within a wider field of consciousness as described by Goswami (1993), Mindell (2000) and Wolf (1999). Trans-reflexivity reflects human beings capacity to engage the numinous 'wholly other' as a continuum within consciousness. Goswami's (1993, 215) quote is instructive: 'Consciousness is not a phenomenon; instead all phenomena exist in consciousness.'

The numinous can impact on consciousness in the way Larsen (1988, 49) describes as a 'breakthrough of the numinous level of meaning.' These deep transformative experiences that touch into the mystery of life are not only potentially meaningful to individuals, but are necessary for evolving and creating a better future collectively (Grof, 2000). The four propositions presented in this article – attention, awareness, reflexivity and trans-reflexivity – outline a graded response in consciousness towards engaging the deep, meaningful, and often disturbing encounters with the numinous. Tacey (2001, 10) may be correct when he identifies that 'sacred forces require sacred responses'. However, when faced with the task of making sense of diverse experiences within consciousness how do we respond? Edelman and Tonini (2001, 220) simply ask whether we become 'prisoners of description or masters of meaning'? This question is at the heart of how we deal with profound psycho-spiritual experiences individually and collectively; it underscores how reflection on the politics of consciousness encourages psycho-spiritual growth or not. Tarnas (2006, 486) identifies the modern temperament of sceptical objectification directed towards the spiritual dimension of life and the wholeness of human beings as the 'inner politics of the modern mind'. Perhaps spiritual emergency reflects the 'growing tip' of collective-renewal. The question remains are we willing to acknowledge it; personally, socially, and politically?

CONCLUSION

The long-term life trajectories of people who have encountered spiritual emergencies hold 'transformative narratives' concerning transitions in consciousness. The author has outlined his own autobiographical account of a spiritual emergency following a numinous encounter, which led to a life-changing journey. Four propositions; identifying different levels of conscious experience are presented from the author's personal and professional experience/reflections since 1986. These illustrate a graded approach 'through' and 'beyond' a transformational crisis. Spiritual emergency highlights the interaction and dichotomy between 'consensus' and 'nonconsensus' experience, which can be paradoxical for an individual in the midst of a transformational crisis. However, in terms of collective-renewal and consciousness, the issue of spiritual emergency raises questions of a political rather than paradoxical nature.

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