

PSYCHOTHERAPY & SPIRITUALITY: Spiritual Emergence or Soul Awakening.

A phenomenon increasingly found in some areas of Psychotherapy is that of people going through a deep transformational process as a result of some sort of shock or trauma. It might be that this shock is a physical one: a car accident; a mugging; an illness; a near-death experience or a traumatic birth of a child. It might also equally well be a more mental shock: a loss of faith; discovering one is an alcoholic or that you were abused as a child; a psychotic episode; a psychic experience; or that your life-partner has been dishonest or unfaithful.

For many people who experience such events, these are shocking and, after a while, the person seems to get over it, for the most part. Life continues relatively as normal. For some however, these self-same events are the trigger that starts that person off into a process of deep and powerful change. Not just a personality change, but a fundamental change of life, direction and possibly even belief systems. In itself the event is significant, but the real significance is the process that results from it. "It changed my life", is the common report. Yet we do not often (except perhaps with marriage and childbirth) welcome these changes or even recognize them.

It is useless to point out to the person that others have experienced a similar event and not had this reactive 'process'. This can sometimes make the person feel worse. It is also fairly useless to deal merely with the symptoms of this transition or change as they are perhaps not directly related to the underlying fundamental process. It is often better to help affirm the person's process and encourage them to move with the change.

Case History: A medical doctor went for a week's visit to a spiritual community and whilst there had a very strong 'insight' that he should take up his music more full-time and that medicine, whilst it had been totally involving up to that time, was becoming less and less of an interest to him. He had been playing in a band on occasional week-ends and evenings. He was also married to a doctor and they had two children. His enthusiastic change of interest began to cause difficulties with his professional practice and his medical partners and also in his home life and was viewed generally with much suspicion. The opposition around him possibly exacerbated his enthusiasm and he became quite manic, quite quickly. The situation deteriorated and he ended up having a breakdown and being "sectioned" into a psychiatric hospital. At this point (only) was I involved when he rang and asked me to help him fight the Section by faxing information about these types of process.

After a while he stabilized on medication, the Section was dropped and he eventually went back to work as a doctor, but in a more administrative capacity for a while. However his marriage had broken down completely and his wife began divorce proceedings. He maintained his interest in the music throughout the whole process and especially in writing songs for the guitar. These often had a 'New Age' or spiritual component, and seemed to just "come out from me". He then met a woman, with a similar interest, and she became his new partner and gave up her well-paid and high-powered work in a bank to join him and help promote his/their music. He resigned from his practice and they moved to a different European country (where she had lived) and increased their output, their range of music and the standard of their music. They seemed very happy in this situation, albeit somewhat less financially secure and in less prestigious professional positions. Their lives have changed.

As a psychotherapist, I am very concerned with people's life changes. One reason is that, not only does the individual often need quite a lot of help, counselling and support during parts of this transition or the often stormy passage of change, but also some of the symptoms that a person evidences during this process can look very like some psychotic symptoms. Perhaps there is little difference between the process of someone changing radically and someone going crazy. I am sure that many times a person going through a transitional experience has been diagnosed as psychotic and treated as such, often for the rest of their lives and possibly with permanent damage from inappropriate treatment. It is only very recently and only as a result of pressure from people like David Lukoff and Stan Grof has DSM IV (the manual of diagnostic classifications) included "spiritual crisis" as one of the possible origins of manic or schizophrenic symptoms.

Please consider for a moment a society which does not recognize puberty as a healthy stage of development. This society is "stuck" in its childhood. Puberty and adolescence is an aberration. The changes in female body shape are distortions that need surgery. The growth of facial, underarm and pubic hair is seen as disgusting and people with this "illness" are locked away. Adolescent spots are treated as a serious skin disease, possibly on a line with the 'buboes' of the Black Death. Puppy-fat is moral degeneracy corrected by a regime of starvation. Anorexia is the ideal state. I suggest that our society treats the psyche's developmental process in the same way. Gauguin was vilified when he gave up his job in a bank. He had to leave France and go to the other side of the world in order to paint.

Stan Grof described this type of life-change as a Spiritual Emergence process and lists some of the aspects that differentiates this from psychosis. Others have used the phrase 'Soul Awakening', for there is frequently - if not inevitably - a new interest in spiritual and religious matters. In a recent article on this subject, I defined this process as: ... becoming aware of an intimate and regular contact with the higher part of ourselves or that which is greater than ourselves, and an increasing dedication to live one's life toward serving that principle rather than our personality; a wish to surrender to the spirit in the moment as well as during major life crises.

There are various manifestations of this type of process. Grof lists various specific types that he has discovered based on his researches. He has categorized many hundreds of accounts into 10 categories. These are described more fully in his books but include Shamanistic Experiences, Psychic Openings, Near-death experiences, and Kundalini Awakening (where the bodily symptoms of tremors and shakings, hyper-sensitivities, hot & cold flushes, waves of emotions and feelings, all sometimes quite violent, predominate). They also include some of the more bizarre Past Life Experiences, Encounters with UFOs and Demonic Possessions (which are thankfully very rare). In a book by Peiro Ferrucci, he studies the lives of more than 500 people with exceptional capacities and synthesizes these into various Ways, like the Way of Beauty, the Way of Illumination, the Way of Devotion. In so doing, he indicates the paths of developmental processes that these exceptional people have undergone and states that these Ways are our potential as well. He writes:

As one proceeds along a Way to the Self, one comes into contact with an entirely new realm that transcends the confines of individuality - the transpersonal level.
"Encountering this world can be an ecstatic experience, but it can also upset the mental balance of someone who is not prepared for it."

I venture to suggest that this happens much more frequently than we can imagine. A person having a break-through, perhaps into their greatness, often instead has a break-down, especially if this process is not correctly identified, by either themselves or those around them. Nicole Kester, a

coordinator of the Spiritual Emergency Network, a world-wide network of therapists and resources to help people in such situations, differentiates like this:

"The difference also in the spiritual emergence experience is that, ideally, it leads to increased creativity, feelings of peace, an expanded sense of compassion, and I would say, healing and compassionate action in the world. ... Spiritual Emergency, as defined by (Emma) Bragdon, is "disorientation and instability that result from intense spiritual experiences which overwhelm the individual's ego functioning and for which there is no social or cultural support."

The best thing we can do as people is not to judge too quickly. As a form of psychotherapy we have to learn new tools, languages and structures that go beyond the purely biographical or the intellectual or behavioural. The material is there. In the spiritual writings through time, like that of Hildegard of Bingen or the Upanishads. Closer to home, The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology has been going many years.

David Lukoff, writing in this Journal in an article "The Myths of Mental Illness", suggests that when we take this journey, we begin to experience the world from a different perspective; that of a more archetypal mode. Our world begins to get 'peopled' with Gods and Demons, Myths and Legends, Dreams and Nightmares, Wondrous Beings or Monsters. We may see ourselves in these shapes and we may see others like this. Actions take on a deeper significance like that which they often carry in myths: forgetting to change the sails to new white ones can mean the death of your father or a chance encountered object (like a ring) means the possibility to defeat the Enemy. If this world of myths is not understood, it can bring a lot of fear with it, as well as a lot of beauty. Normal rational thought plays little part in these realms.

For example I remember that, during such a period in my own life, after reading D.M. Thomas's 'The White Hotel', not only did I seem to start to be surrounded with the most incredible eroticism emerging from mundane objects, but also I became terrified of the tunnels that link the London Underground platforms, for it seemed as if all these crowds of people (and myself) were being funnelled to some horrific end like that of Babi Ya, described in the book. Paranoia and psychosis indeed perhaps! Well, that is the issue.

Let me give another example: an elderly lady in Texas rang up an SEN referral service some time ago and said, "Can you help me? Last Christmas God came and sat on my head." When asked what she meant by that she said, "I seem to know things that are going to happen before they happen and I get messages telling me what to do and what is happening with other people. I know what people are thinking. Now, my Minister says that I am of the Devil and my women's group at the Church say that I am a witch and my husband, well, he just doesn't want to know anything about this at all. So can you help me?" She was referred to a counsellor who is aware of some of the aspects of these processes.

I would like to reinforce the importance of an acceptance of this type of process. Our society's fears of mental illness and the social stigma that surrounds it can blind us to some of the possibilities on the fringes. I am NOT against psychiatry and the safe, loving care that is found in many mental wards and hospitals. I am supporting a wider framework where some of these areas can be more widely recognized and more creatively worked with. This is happening - slowly. The psychiatrist R.D. Laing was one of the first. Many others have followed and yet this is a poorly recognized field - even amongst the professionals and especially amongst the professionals.

For many years and on many occasions, people have been mistaken in their diagnoses. There are well recorded incidences where conditions such as toxic brain pathology in reactions to local anesthetics, reactions to withdrawal of Valium, temporal lobe epilepsy, vitamin B12 deficiency, allergic reactions to wheat or rye (especially if this has been distorted by a virus), prolonged sleep deprivation, sensory isolation phenomena, allergic viral encephalitis etc. have all produced symptoms that subjectively and objectively are indistinguishable from hallucinogenic intoxication or psychotic experiences. In other words, many things can cause one to seem absolutely crazy. It is easy to add a spiritual emergence process to this list when one reads of peoples' direct experiences.

A man of about 45 came to a week-long workshop of Deep Ecology where people were encouraged to express the pain and suffering of the earth and animal species in relation to pollution and devastation caused by people. He was a successful businessman from the northwest of America who had sold out his businesses after a divorce. He became increasingly distressed about man's pollution, identifying deeply (too much so) with the vanishing species. He stayed up all one night and became quite manic. He was built like a lumberjack and was very strong. He scared the workshop leader when he fell to his knees and clutched her round the legs as she was taking a walk in the garden before breakfast. "Tell me how to save the World!" he said. Many people wanted him to be "taken away" out of the workshop - to the mental hospital etc. We managed to contain the situation for a while, but the breakthrough came when he read a copy of Emma Bragdon's book. "Oh I've got that and I've got that one. So that's what is happening to me. O.K. I'm all right then." It was his fear that was making him manic. He stayed for a few extra days to integrate his experience and then caught his scheduled flight home. Since then he has written 9 books - self-help books for people having a crisis. Many of the sentiments, though not the language as they are written for ordinary business people, have a spiritual flavour.

References

The Moon and Sixpence by Somerset Maugham is based on Gauguin's life story.

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